Crossing Lines: Topoi of *Kynde* in Medieval Romance

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Abstract

"Crossing Lines: Topoi of *Kynde* in Medieval Romance" examines the use of topoi, or stock plot events, settings, and characters, in late medieval romances to experiment with *kynde*, a Middle English word meaning type, nature, Nature, identity, essence, and kindness. Each chapter takes up a different cluster of topoi and set of *kynde* features. Chapter one considers how the sultan's marriage threat, monstrous birth, and sacraments explore conversions of race and religion in *Sir Gowther,* Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale, and *King of Tars*; chapter two examines the fair unknown and class and gender exchange in *Le Roman de Silence*; and chapter three takes up animal disguise and transformation in *William of Palerne*. My project considers also the nature of the genre of romance and its relationships with neighboring genres.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In a motif familiar from *Oedipus* to Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* to *Star Wars*, a royal infant is brought to the wilderness, where he will be found and raised in obscurity before some catalyst drives him into the world to seek his destiny. Typically, he will come face to face with the realization that the people who raised him are not his real mother and father. Here is how *William of Palerne*, a fourteenth-century English romance, handles this moment of alienation:

> Whan William, þis worþi child, wist þe soþe,
> and knew þat þe cowherde nas nouȝt his kinde fader,
> he was wiȝtliche awondered and gan to wepe sore,
> and seide saddely to himself sone þerafter,
> "A! gracious gode God! þouȝ grettest of alle!
> moch is þi mercy and þi miȝt, þi menske and þi grace!
> Now wot I never in þis world of wham y am come,
> ne what destene me is diȝt; but God do his wille!
> Ac wel y wot witerly wiþoute ani faile,
> to þis man and his meke wif most y am holde,
> for þei ful faire han me fostered and fed a long time;
> þat God for his grete miȝt al here god hem ȝeld!

But not y never what to done, to wende þus hem fro,

þat han al kindenes me kyd, and y ne kan hem ȝelde!"[1]

When William, this worthy child, knew the truth,

and knew that the cowherd was not his natural father,

he was greatly awondered and began to weep sorely,

and said sadly to himself soon thereafter,

"Ah! gracious good God! thou greatest of all!

much is thy mercy and thy might, thy honor and thy grace!

Now I know never in this world of whom I am come,

nor what destiny is prepared for me; but God do his will!

And well I know plainly without fail,

to this man and his meek wife most I am indebted to,

for they very well have fostered and fed me a long time;

may God for his great might all their good repay them!

But I know not at all what to do, to go thus from them,

that have shown me all kindness, and I cannot repay them!

This fair unknown narrative is conventional, even clichéd, but in the hands of this poet (also named William), it is also compelling, and it provides fertile ground for an examination of identity, belonging, the nature of nature, and ethics. William's lament is prompted by the discovery that the cowherd is not his "kinde" father, and I have translated "kinde" here as

[1] *William of Palerne: An Alliterative Romance* ed. Gerrit H.V. Blunt (Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1985), ll. 308-321. Future citations will be in text. All translations of this text and others are mine unless otherwise noted.

"natural." The same word recurs near the end of the passage, when William declares that the cowherd and his wife have shown him "al kindenes," which I have translated as "kindness." The two senses are linked and so is the complaint in between. "Kindenes" is natural affection or benevolence, often specifically that owed due to kinship or other close bonds; ironically, the cowherd and his wife do not owe this to the child they have found in the woods, and yet they offer it all the same. In ignorance of his "kinde" father, William does not know his true nature or his place in the world. With the loss of class, kin, and family comes a loss of his essential and entire self: William is cast adrift, to borrow another conventional romance motif. His future is likewise adrift, left to the exigencies of God, providence, and genre conventions.

The use of conventions such as the fair unknown creates in medieval romance a site for the exploration of "kinde," also spelled *kynde.* As the passage above suggests, the meaning of *kynde* is expansive. It can mean a type or category, as in this use in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:* "And þy burȝ and þy bures best ar holden, / stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde, / Þe wyȝtest and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde" (And thy burg and thy braves best are held / Stoutest under steel gear on steeds to ride, / The strongest and the worthiest of this world's kind).[2] *Kynde* is also the essential nature of someone or something, as in *House of Fame:* "Now I have told, yf thou have mynde, / How speche or soun, of pure kynde, Enclyned ys upward to meve" (Now I have told, if you remember, / How speech or sound, of pure *kynde*, / Is inclined to move upward).[3] It can also mean nature or anthropomorphized Nature: "Hath Kynde the wrought al only hire [Criseyde] to plese?" (Has *Kynde* made you only to please her [Criseyde]?).[4] As we

[2] *Gawain and the Green Knight* ed. and trans. Larry D. Benson (Morgantown: West Virginia UP 2015), 713-725. All translations of this text Benson's.

[3] *House of Fame,* in *The Riverside Chaucer,* 3rd. ed, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 823-825.

[4] *Troilus and Criseyde,* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1095.

have seen with *William of Palerne, kynde* is also often used to describe kinship groups, and this can extend to other kinds of relationships such as shared religion as well. It also has an ethical sense, stemming from a sense of what is "natural" or "proper." Andrew Galloway describes this as the "natural" obligations incurred in kinship relationships among the nobility, but also "explications of such a notion on a wider social scale, combining reciprocation, affinity, and the natural order." [5] For Galloway, *kynde*'s meaning of "'Natural,' 'cohering by affinity,' and 'reciprocal'—and their contraries—are powerful and interlinked notions in late-medieval England...[that] allowed for varying concepts of community, which were deeply rooted in the social values of late-medieval England."[6] The concept of *kynde* offers a look into a different way of conceptualizing identity and nature, in which these different categories that seem more distantly related today are allowed to intermingle and interact. This project will examine *kynde* through medieval romances, a genre particularly fascinated with group belonging, identity, and the kinds of liminal test cases that show the muddy borders of *kynde*. I will read *kynde* particularly through romance's uses of conventional plot events, characters, and settings in a device called *topos*.

Critics of romance have long noted the genre's tendency to repeat with variation certain stock, stylized topoi. Susan Wittig calls this phenomenon

> the semiology of social gestures, the language of social ritual: leave-takings, greetings, meals and banquets, marriages and knightings and tournaments. Each one of the highly

[5] Andrew Galloway, 'The Making of a Social Ethic in Late-Medieval England: From Gratitudo to 'Kyndenesse'," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 3 (1994): 382.

[6] Galloway, "From Gratitudo to 'Kyndenesse'," 382.

> ritualized events to which the formulas themselves refer is also a kind of formulaic language, a complex system of significations which is as thoroughly understood and articulated in its own culture as that culture's natural language.[7]

Arlyn Diamond advocates reading the romance "with and through its fantasies and conventions, finding social and psychological meaning in the formulas and motifs which constitute its symbolic discourse,"[8] and Ad Putter asks,

> Why do these romances always reconfigure the most arbitrary and intractable incidents – boats that drift out of human control; misguided decisions taken in haste; letters that never arrive at their destination, and so on – into the most purposeful and patterned design?[9]

In 2011 Derek Pearsall, famously once a great detractor of the genre, celebrates the pleasures in

> the repetition of old plots, repetition of conventional descriptions, repetition of conventional phrases and images... Repetition of motifs, a common stock of language and metaphor and incident, fast pace, predictable outcome, are what is to be enjoyed in medieval popular romance – anathema to any form of post-medieval aesthetic.[10]

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[7] Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 45.

[8] Arlyn Diamond, "Loving Beasts: The Romance of *William of Palerne,*" in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance,* ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 144.

[9] Ad Putter, "The Narrative Logic of *Emaré,*" in *The Spirit of Middle English Popular Romance*, 158.

Though this formulation captures the central importance and aesthetic pleasures of romance's motifs, it nevertheless still neglects the literary merits of the genre as well as its postmedieval continuations. Saunders correctly observes that these iterating narrative elements are both constitutive of medieval romance and yet still enjoy a long afterlife:

> Magical adventure and encounter with those who possess supernatural powers are essential building blocks of romance narratives. These motifs endure in modern and post-modern forms of romance, powerfully present, for instance, in the adventures of Harry Potter, or the fantasy worlds created by Tolkien and Philip Pullman. Part of the enduring appeal of magic, however, is that it also goes beyond the exotic: its effects are both wonderful and fearful. The topos offers the potential for endless exploitation.[11]

The sustained efforts by critics to rearticulate this idea points to the way in which it has come to constitute the genre, its usefulness to modern study, and also to the difficulty of pinning down precise language to describe it.

Helen Cooper's landmark 2004 study marks the first serious effort to organize and characterize these iterating motifs. She begins by imagining the bearsuit worn by players on the Tudor stage as demanding new literary bears to occupy it, the same material token repurposed and reimagined in different texts but still recognizable, still recalling its previous uses.[12] The

[10] Derek Pearsall, "The Pleasure of Popular Romance: A Prepatory Essay," in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 11.

[11] Corinne Saunders, "Subtle Crafts: Magic and Exploitation in Medieval English Romance," in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance* ed. Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic, and Judith Weiss (London: Boydell & Brewer: 2010), 108.

bearskin more broadly represents "an idea that behaves like a gene in its ability to replicate faithfully and abundantly, but also on occasion to adapt, mutate, and therefore survive in different forms and cultures," a concept she labels *meme,* though as the subtitle of her work shows she considers this at least somewhat interchangeable with the term *motif.*[13]

Motif, in turn, still holds center-stage in the field of folklore studies following Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928 and the highly influential *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* by Stith Thompson first published in 1932.[14] In his introduction, Thompson lays out his project for categorizing and organizing folk literature with some coverage for other genres including myths, fabliaux, and the medieval romance. Using the unit of motif, which he somewhat vaguely defines as "those details out of which full-fledged narratives are composed," adding that motifs can be characters, actions, or "attendant circumstances of the action."[15] Some of the motifs he records are fairly specific to the folktale, such as H41.4 "the princess on the pea" or K445 "the emperor's new clothes." Others, however, can be found in Helen Cooper's study of romances, such as D1076 "magic ring" or K2110.1 "calumniated wife." The colossal and ongoing classificatory project has remained largely the province of folklore studies, and in literary theory the use of the word "motif" is somewhat muddy. *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* considers motif only under the heading of "theme," where it lays out some of the problems of the term:

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[12] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2004), 1-3.

[13] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 3.

[14] V. IA. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Lawrence Scott (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968).

[15] Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* Revised and Enlarged ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1955), 10-11.

> The use of 'motif' has further added to terminological difficulties: many literary critics use 'motif and 'theme' interchangeably; some, however, distinguish between these terms by defining motifs as theme-like units that are smaller than theme (subthemes, of less importance to the text as a whole); while some - chiefly those influenced by folklore studies - treat motif as an extratextual unit of meaning that is larger than theme.[16]

The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms likewise registers this overlap with the idea of theme, giving, "A situation, incident, idea, image, or character-type that is found in many different literary works, folktales, or myths; or any element of a work that is elaborated into a more general theme."[17] The confusion around the word *motif* is likely why Cooper proposed the language of *meme* instead, but in the time since the publication of her monograph, the rise of the internet meme has wholly transformed the word.

In search of better language, then, I turn to Elizabeth Fowler, who in her 2011 essay proposes *topos*:

> The term *topos* ('commonplace' in Greek) means 'topic' and 'topography' at once: it is a pattern of language (often including a familiar scene or setting and its attendant set of values) that recalls us to a tradition of images, arguments, and feelings rather as if they were stored in a particular location...The topos of the tournament, then, is a cultural 'location' for the topics of military discipline, Christian views of Jesus' divinity, moral

[16] *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, 4th ed. Ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), s.v. theme.

[17] *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms,* 4th ed. Ed. Chris Baldrick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015) s.v. motif.

> training of the soul, civic pageantry, questions of law, and all the familiar trains of thought and emotion that go with these topics. Each example of a topos reminds us of other examples we have experienced, invites us to compare them, and initiates a process of thinking and feeling that is shaped by the topos.[18]

The literary use of the term *topos* was popularized in medieval studies by Ernst Robert Curtius's 1953 *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.[19] Though Curtius's focus was on Latin literature rather than the vernacular, the term *topos* has the advantages of moving across genres and of connecting romance to the learned tradition of rhetoric, which uses the term more narrowly to refer to stock formulae used in composing oratory. The relationship between romance and rhetoric and, more specifically, rhetorical topics has been demonstrated convincingly by Eugene Vance in *From Topic to Tale: Logic and Narrativity in the Middle Ages.*[20] This terminology also affirms the dialogic and philosophic role of these iterating narrative elements, an affirmation valuable because of the long history of underestimating the intellectual (and aesthetic) achievements of the genre, a strain of thought that still sometimes resurfaces, so that in 2018 James Simpson can write,

> I understand romance 'thought' to be a refusal of explicit thought. I differ from the Marxists, however, in not seeking to expose this refusal of thought as a 'classical

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[18] Elizabeth Fowler, "The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in *Sir Isumbras*," in *The Spirit of Middle English Popular Romance*, 99-100.

[19] Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1953).

[20] Eugene Vance, *From Topic to Tale: Logic and Narrativity in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

> example of a hegemonic culture'. Instead, I present romance non-thought as an especially subtle form of cybernetic (in the etymological sense of 'self-governing') reformism. This especially subtle form of thought requires a holiday from explicit, rational thought, from thinking out loud, and from thinking too explicitly about shame. Instead, such 'thought' operates by disabling thought; it requires 'unthinking'. Romance (un)thinking seeks not to deceive or mesmerize, but rather recognizes that some profound issues, and particularly shame, are better not thought about explicitly.[21]

Romances do think and urge their audiences to think, and they do so through their use of topoi. I follow Fowler in asserting that "romances are complex thought experiments that lead the reader through a process of thinking about the deepest issues of political philosophy and jurisprudence," although in this project my focus will instead be on how romances think through questions of kind, identity, essence, nature.[22]

Romance's use of topoi makes the genre a richly productive site for exploring complex and politically loaded issues such as race, gender, religion, and race. The referential nature of topoi put romances in dialogue with one another, allowing each romance to serve as a test case that is at once distinct from the others and tightly bound to them. In this project I will focus on romance topoi to consider not what romance is, but what it can do. In homage to the genre, I propose to do this in a series of test cases that will examine a topos or small cluster of related topoi. In so doing, I will show the power of romance in its exploration of and rebellion against the conditions of nature itself and to look not for classifications but for the questions that

[21] James Simpson, "Unthinking Thought: Romance's Wisdom," in *Thinking Medieval Romance* ed. Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 37.

[22] Fowler, "The Romance Hypothetical," 99.

underlie them. This project will work to understand romance's ability to seek out the cultural locations of our understanding of nature and give them imaginative space and power.

In so doing, I will follow romance into the muck. Romance's interest in taboos and thorny problems leads the genre into troubling stagings of violence, and often structural kinds of violence such as misogyny, racism, imperialism, antisemitism, and more. This medieval bigotry has rightly troubled critics and also poses problems for presenting romances in the classroom. As Nahir Otaño Gracia writes,

> Romance tends to racialize the enemies of the chivalric heroes by dehumanizing them and normalizing violence in several ways, depending on the context and place of creation...Dehumanization based on race is also about creating whiteness – those that are humanized are constructed as white. We can see how this structural injustice plays out in medieval romance.[23]

As we will see in Chapter One, romances seem particularly uncomfortable about admitting racial and religious outsiders into Christianity in contrast with theologians who treated conversion as a matter of course. In so doing, they participate in racemaking. But those sites, those *topoi* of racemaking are contingent and contested. As Otaño Gracia shows, romances are not monolithic; they do not all speak with one voice. Romances engage in conversation with one another, and they can ask open-ended questions as well as make assertions. It is not enough to stop at saying that romances are racist. Furtherance of our understanding of this genre, this period, and the

[23] Nahir Otaño Gracia, "'Making Race' in Medieval Romance: A Premodern Critical Race Studies Perspective," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance,* ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023), 120.

institution of race itself lies in delving into that romance conversation to understand how romance probes race and what fault lines it uncovers.

For some scholars, shock at the hierarchies or violence found in romances can lead to a turning away from a text or from the genre as a whole. This kind of criticism risks writing itself out of existence by effacing the value of reading and writing about the romance. Anna Roberts offers very faint praise to counterbalance the problems she sees in the romance *Emaré*:

> Rape, incest, various forms of torture, imprisonment, and abandonment flourish in the imaginary worlds of hagiography and romance. But these literary accounts, like many modern ones, frequently construct interesting paradoxes within their textual representations of violence against women. *Emaré*, for example, while it records the tale of a woman who successfully avoids incest-rape, also records the potentially mortal consequences of such resistance; and although it creates a saintly heroine capable of surviving great suffering, it also affirms the power of violence as a force that limits women's freedom, polices women's behavior, and fosters the patriarchal assumption that women need male protection. In this way it contributes to what Susan Brownmiller calls 'rape culture,' a culture wherein rape functions as 'a sufficient threat to keep all women in a constant state of intimidation.'[24]

Emaré does offer us a female protagonist, a radical portrayal in an era when many genres of writing tend to efface the female subject completely. However, it is also necessary to remember that the portrayal of rape and incest does not necessarily constitute a full-throated endorsement of

[24] Anna Roberts, *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1998), 82.

them, and nor does this romance in fact portray the actual acts of rape or incest. The consummation of incest is so rare in romance that many critics refer to this topos as near-miss incest.[25] *Emaré* shares Roberts's horror and turns away from this violence (which is, not incidentally, threatened by the heroine's would-be "male protection," her father). In raising the threats of rape and incest, however, the text creates a site for discourse—with other romances and for modern critics.

What, then, is the role of antiracist and feminist studies of medieval romance? First and foremost, such criticism, if it is to be productive, must not turn away from reading the romance when it finds trouble. These contested sites that stage near-miss incest or encounters with Saracens or calumniated wives, topoi that dig into thorny issues of identity, are the source of the romance's power. This power can be seen particularly in the moments when romances are the least definite, declarative and unified and instead leave space for contingency, uncertainty, even disagreement. By being attentive to these moments, often where the text or our own reading experience becomes uncomfortable, we can get at the animating questions and conundrums of the genre, many of which are equally urgent today. In so doing we can better understand the enduring popularity and power of the romance. To continue with *Emaré* as an example, the near-miss incest topos creates a space for audiences, medieval and modern, to ask questions about gender, kingship, and even genre. What happens when a woman is in sexual danger from the man who is supposed to protect her? How does a father go from jealously guarding his daughter's sexuality to bestowing her on an appropriate husband? What happens when a king abuses his power?

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[25] See Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

When Emaré's father decides to wed her, he outfits her in a robe encrusted with precious jewels and embroidered with depictions of other romance lovers: Ydony and Amadas, Tristrem and Isowde, and Florys and Blawncheflour, as well as the image of the cloth's maker, the emir's daughter, and her beloved. What can we make of these connections to other romances? Topos-like, these images pull a cascade of associations into *Emaré*: taboo loves that cut across classes, marriages, and religions; the trials endured and tricks performed by the lovers; their flights from or incursions into courtly spaces; the many roles of women as objects of desire as well as makers and movers. These images, like romance itself, tend to open up rather than foreclose interpretive possibilities. Is the king trying to legitimize his incestuous desire by associating it with taboo love affairs from romance? Does the robe have magical properties like the love potion Tristrem consumes? Will the robe bring on terrible trials or armor Emaré against them? How will other characters in the romance read the robe, and how will we?

Chapter 1

Race, Religion, and Monstrous Birth in Three Romances

I. "Of Cristen Kende:" Introduction

The King of Tars, like so many romances, begins with a king and queen who have a beautiful daughter—the most beautiful daughter imaginable. In romances this usually spells trouble. Desire is an unruly thing, and not all those who desire such a beautiful princess will be appropriate matches. One such suitor elicits a furious response from the girl's father:

> Bi Him that dyed on the rode,
> Ich wald arst spille min hert blode
> In bateyl to ben yslawe.
> Y nold hir give a Sarazin
> For alle the lond that is mine.
> The devel him arst to drawe,
> Bot sche wil with hir gode wille
> Be wedded to him, hirselve to spille.[26]

> By im that died on the cross,
> I would first spill my heart's blood
> In battle to be slain.
> I would not give her to a Saracen
> For all the land that is mine.

[26] *The King of Tars*, ed. John H. Chandler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications 2015), ll. 40-47. All future citations will be in text.

The devil he would draw first,

Unless she will with her goodwill

Be wedded to him, herself to destroy.

The devil, he suggests, would be a likelier match for this Saracen than would be his daughter. Though the Saracen suitor has as of yet offered no threat of spilling blood, as we will see, such threats in pursuit of a beautiful princess are commonplace in romances, and the father, the King of Tars, anticipates a mortal threat that does indeed follow—while also alluding to a theological threat to his daughter. Despite his protestations, though, the king does not die defending his daughter. When the ensuing war turns against the Christians, the princess agrees to marry the sultan.

As the wedding unfolds, the ideological stakes of that match begin to bubble up. Of her parents, we are told, "Her care was ever aliche newe, / Hem chaunged bothe hide and hewe" (Their sorrow was always new, / They changed both hide and hue) (367-368). "Hide and hew" is a conventional set phrase denoting the parents' change in countenance, but it also participates in color play that will continue throughout the romance. Likewise, we are told, "Gret diol it was forto se, / The bird that was so bright on ble / Have so foule a mett" (Great dole it was to see, / The bird that was so bright of complexion / To have so foul a mate. 387-390). "Fair" means both pale and beautiful, and this formulation emphasizes the double meaning, pairing it with "ble," which means "color" or "complexion," against "foule," the ugliness of the racialized Saracen. The fair Christian princess and the foul Saracen are defined in opposition to one another, an opposition than entails both color and creed. Though he has married her, the Sultan will not consummate the marriage: "For nothing wold he neyghe that may / Til that sche leved opon his

lay, / That was of Cristen kende" (For nothing would he come near that maid / Until she believed in his faith, / That was of Christian *kynde*, 403-405). This presents a problem. Though he could coerce a marriage, it still seems as though there may be something unbridgeable between the sultan and the princess, something that comes down to what *kynde* they each are.

As the color play in this episode suggests, race tells part of the story.[27] According to Geraldine Heng, racial logic has the ability "to stalk and merge with other hierarchical systems."[28] While some critics trace the history or pre-history of race in the West to the ancient world, others equate the origins of race with the beginnings of "scientific racism,"[29] and thus assert that race begins only as recently as the Spanish Inquisition,[30] or the post-Enlightenment period,[31] or even the nineteenth century.[32] The pseudo-scientific mode of racism perhaps most familiar today emerged in the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, when thinkers tried to create classifications or hierarchies of people based on fixed biological criteria. Using empirical observation implied objectivity and conferred the authority of "science" on racist ideology.[33] Subsequently, this pseudo-scientific notion of race thoroughly calcified through

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[27] For skin color in connection with Bernard of Clairvaux's *Song of Songs* sermon, see Bruce Holsinger, "The Color of Salvation: Desire, Death, and the Second Crusade in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*," in *The Tongue of the Fathers: Gender and Ideology in Twelfth-Century Latin*, ed. David Townsend and Andrew Taylor (Penn, 1998). For an overview of the racialization of Saracens, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001): 113-146.

[28] Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, New York, Port Melbourne, New Delhi, Singapore: Cambridge UP 2018), 20.

[29] Martin Orkin and Alexa Alex Joubin, *Race* (London: Routledge 2019), 64-66.

[30] For example, Robert Wald Sussman, *The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 2014), 11.

[8] For example, Denise Fierra da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2009).

[32] Patricia McCann-Mortimer, Martha Augustinos, and Amanda LeCouteur, "'Race' and the Human Genome Project: Constructions of Scientific Legitimacy," *Discourse & Society* 15, no. 4 (2004): 410.

a long history of philosophical, scientific, legal, and other institutional efforts to rationalize and systematize global systems of colonialism and hierarchy. As a result, the idea that race has a biological referent is deeply embedded in Western culture, and race in the modern era appears more stable than it really is. However, race need not invoke color or even biology. Geraldine Heng defines race as:

> *one of the primary names we have – a name we retain for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes – attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and power differentially to human groups*. [emphasis hers][34]

Key here is selective essentialization; the traits that are essentialized can be phenotypical, but they can also be cultural, allowing race to merge with religion. I will examine both race and religion under the banner of *kynde*, and in particular I will consider how romances imagine conversions of racial and religious *kynde*: whether and under what conditions such border-crossings are possible and what is at stake in their transgression.

King of Tars shares both plot elements and thematic concerns with a number of other romances that deal with interreligious marriage and monstrous birth. Both Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale and *Sir Gowther* have a number of elements in common with *King of Tars*, but also depart in startling ways; in *Sir Gowther*, for example, the interreligious marriage is threatened

[33] Martin Orkin and Alexa Alice Joubin, *Race*, 66-70.

[34] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages,* 19-27.

but never occurs, and neither romance replicates the black-to-white transformation of the sultan in *King of Tars*. Here as throughout my dissertation, I will conceptualize the relationship between these romances using shared topoi. In particular, this chapter focuses on a topos more commonly examined by scholars of early modern literature than by medievalists: the monstrous birth. [35] The monstrous birth topos occurs when a child is born to at least one human parent but has monstrous characteristics, or else is known to have one non-human parent and therefore might be assumed to have monstrous characteristics. The best-known English examples come from Arthuriana, including Arthur's birth via dark magic and disguise, Merlin's birth which in some stories is by demonic paternity, and perhaps even Mordred's birth, which involves the double stigma of incest and a witch with transformative magic for a mother.[36] Monstrous births reveal something about the hidden act of conception, and so this topos frequently signals an interest in women's secrets and policing the sexuality of women. At times, this topos shadows the related accused queen topos,[37] by having a normal birth be slanderously misreported as a monstrous birth in order to imply that the lady has been not only unfaithful but has consorted with an animal or demon. Another related topos is multiple births, which can at times be used to imply adultery. On the other hand, the topos is diametrically opposed to near-miss incest, in which the potential partners are too alike rather than too unalike. Whereas incest raises the problem of endogamous marriage, monstrous birth implies exogamous relations taken to a taboo extreme, with women consorting with non-human partners, typically either animals or supernatural creatures that often carry

[35] See, for example, Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993); Maja, Bondestam, ed. *Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture: Concepts of Monstrosity Before the Advent of the Normal* (Baltimore, Maryland: Project Muse, 2020).

[36] The Melusina romances in French also contain notable examples, again with an other-than-human parent.

[37] C.f. Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 280-294.

demonic connotations.[38] In so doing, this topos can also ask questions about legitimacy and heredity, in particular about whether moral behavior is inborn. Although monstrous births frequently ask questions about gender, for the purposes of this chapter I will be considering the bearing of this topos on race and religion.

King of Tars, with its visualization of the outcome of marital mixing and its moment of racial transformation, offers the most close-up look at the boundaries between racial and religious *kyndes*, where other romances often raise the potential of mixing but avert the actual event. Nonetheless, the anxieties revealed by the *avoidance* of group mixing can be instructive as well. In Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale, the Christian princess Custance marries the sultan of Syria, who converts to Christianity to marry her. However, the sultan's mother murders him and the other converts and sets Custance adrift in a rudderless boat, which takes her to pagan Britain. She converts some of the locals and marries the king but is falsely accused of bringing forth a monstrous birth and set adrift again. She arrives in Rome and by the end is happily reunited with her husband. In this romance, the monstrous birth is displaced from the marriage to the sultan, but it nonetheless asks questions about the edges of *kynde*: who can get married, and who can reproduce.

Although the plot trajectories of these romances are fairly different, they all involve a monstrous birth and a marriage between a Christian princess and a sultan, whether realized or only threatened. Marriage and reproduction constitute a sort of test case for the boundaries of *kynde* that anticipates how scientists now evaluate the edges of animal species in part by whether they can bring forth viable offspring. Here, the category ostensibly in question is religion, but

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[38] However, incest and monstrous birth do often overlap. See Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

these romances' reluctance to realize marriage and reproduction between a Christian and a Muslim hardens the boundary between these groups and raises questions about conversion and race. These stories are troubled with accounts of false conversions, even as they map religion on to potentially racial features: skin color in *Tars* and geography in The Man of Law's Tale. Besides marriage, which theorizes a straddling of *kynde* boundaries, the sacraments of baptism and confession come into play as the romances theorize a sort of border crossing, where non-Christians or sinning Christians can be brought into the community.[39]

These crossings dramatize the fraught relationship between essentialism and conversion. To return to Geraldine Heng, race involves "*differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental.*"[40] Essentialism seems to crop up across history, but in these medieval romances, it appears particularly tied to religion, even more than to physiology. Although converting non-Christians was a laudable goal in the eyes of the medieval Church, these romances treat conversion with suspicion and anxiety, and the idea of reproduction between a Christian and even a former Muslim who converted to Christianity as almost a non-starter. In so doing, they essentialize religion to varying degrees, demonstrating race and religion blurring together: never perfectly fusing, but perhaps *con*fusing as they slide in and out of phase as they play on one another.

II. "Now I Lowve God": Sir Gowther's Paternity and Penance

[39] Dynastic marriages can also cross or even constitute borders. As Robert Bartlett observes, "The political and cultural geography of medieval Europe is, in part, constituted by who gave brides to whom." *Blood Royal: Dynastic Politics in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020), 20.

[40] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 19-27.

Sir Gowther is found in two fifteenth-century manuscripts, and its most important source is the twelfth-century *Robert le Diable*, although it draws on rich and interconnected literary and folk traditions.[41] Unlike the other two romances under consideration in this chapter, *Gowther* separates the monstrous birth episode from the interreligious marriage plot, which is never fully realized—only threatened and averted. The hesitant approach towards marriage and reproduction between Christians and Muslims in all of these romances, but particularly in *Gowther*, reveals fears of miscegenation, and perhaps in part a genuine uncertainty about what this kind of mixing looks like in practice. In *Gowther,* a messenger arrives with a threat for the Christian princess: a rival political leader will have her in marriage, or he and his army will conquer her father's lands. This intruding group initially is marked not by terms of explicit religion, geography, or color, but with the leader's title: "Tho Sawdyn" (The Sultan),[42] a title that also appears in the two other romances under consideration. This brief message, taking up only seven lines of the romance, invokes a topos related to that of monstrous birth and kicks off the final third or so of the tale. That topos, which I will call the sultan's marriage threat,[43] is a stock romance plot event in which a Muslim sultan demands a Christian princess in marriage, is refused, and wages a war against her father to claim her. The sultan's marriage threat speaks to the sexual desirability of the Christian princess, who is like any good romance heroine the most beautiful maiden in the land, but it also raises the specter of a dangerous Other and juxtaposes the joining of two groups in marriage, where new life can be made, and on the battlefield, where life will be lost.

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[41] "Sir Gowther: Introduction" in *The Middle English Breton Lais* ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications 1995).

[42] "Sir Gowther" in *The Middle English Breton Lais* ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications 1995), l. 382. Subsequent citations will occur in text and will reference line numbers.

[43] C.f. *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, *Sir Isumbras*, and *Sir Perceval of Galles*.

So ubiquitous is the sultan's marriage threat topos that in *Sir Gowther*, the title of "sultan" and the threat alone are enough to trigger this subplot, with relatively little information given. In this iteration, the threatening nature of the sultan's forces are foregrounded, with the threat issued even before the request. The message in full reads:

My lord wele gretys the;
Tho Sawdyn, that is of mykyll myght
Wyll wer apon the dey and nyghtt
And bren thi bowrus free,
And sley thi men bot thu hym sende
Thi doghttur that is so feyr and heynde,
That he mey hur wedde. (381-378)

My lord well greets you;
The sultan, that is of much might
Will war upon you day and night
And burn your noble chambers,
And slay your men unless you send him
Your daughter that is so fair and refined,
That he may wed her.

The greeting receives a single rather bland line, as does the praise of the princess's beauty. The message is instead dominated by images of death and destruction, which preempt the request

itself. The "bowrus," or private rooms including bedrooms, become a site of burning in war rather than in marital union. The assumption here is clearly that war, not marriage, will be the outcome. The princess's father, titled not as a sultan but as emperor, responds in kind: "And y wyll not, be Cryst wonde, / Gyffe hor to no hethon hownde, / Then wer my bale bredde" (And I will not, by Christ's wound, / Give her to any heathen hound, / Then would my bale be bred, 391-393). The emperor instantly labels the sultan as a heathen, using a familiar epithet to dehumanize him. The heavy use of "hound" language throughout the genre to describe Muslims conveys the sense that these marriages are almost an inter-species affair, stretching the possibilities of exogamy to the very limit.[44] The use of "breeding" further strengthens the animalization of the Muslims, but it also suggests that for this father, the danger is not so much in the risk to the bride's soul, but in the mixing of racial-religious groups. The romance gives no other indication of what sort of offspring might issue from such a pairing. Just as King of Tars produces a formless child of a Christian-Muslim marriage, Gowther imagines for the hypothetical baby no form other than the amorphous idea of "bale." Unlike the Constance narratives, in which a Christian princess marries a Saracen, *Gowther* treats interreligious marriage as so taboo the narrative cannot allow it to happen. The bale that would be born from the marriage is a sort of monstrous birth averted, projected instead onto the monstrous birth of Gowther himself at the start of the romance.

After this initial encounter between Christians and Muslims, however, the latter group takes on a different label, no less loaded and ubiquitous than the title of "sultan." In addition to identifying the sultan's men as "heathens," a generic term for non-Christians, the romance also

[44] See Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 230. She terms *hound* "[Saracens'] conventional opprobrious sobriquet in chansons de geste."

deploys the term "Saracen," often with an accompanying epithet underlining their status as frightening Others: "Sarsyns kene," "Sarsyns dredde"; and, in one case, emphasizing dark skin: "Sarsyns blake" (435, 478, 714). The word "Saracen" predates Islam and in late antiquity described the Arabs, but by the late eleventh and twelfth century it was used in the Latin West to describe Muslims of various nationalities and excluded Christian Arabs: the word had shifted from an ethnic label to a religious one. At times, the term "Saracen" was even applied to non-Muslim pagans, including people from well before the birth of Islam. Idols, even those from Biblical times, were sometimes referred to by corruptions of the name of Muhammad.[45] In spite of its broad application, the term still retained some specificity. St. Jerome (347-420 CE) and church historian Sozomen (400-450 CE) created a new etymology for the word "Saracen," claiming that Muslims took this name to assert a genealogy from Sara, wife of Abraham, out of shame of being descended from Abraham's slave Hagar, a claim later echoed by prominent etymologer Isidore of Seville in the seventh century.[46] Perhaps paradoxically, Firmin le Ver in the early fifteenth century defines "Saracenus" in his Latin-French dictionary as "paganus," but gives the same etymology relating to Sarah.[47] This etymology, though false, imagines a family tree for all Muslims and puts particular pressure on the issue (so to speak) of legitimacy and descent—a theme also at stake in the interreligious marriage plots of these romances and in particular in *King of Tars*, as we shall see. Thus, the label of Saracen moves between the ethnic and religious, capturing far more racialization of this group than the word "Muslim" does.

[45] John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 126-127.

[46] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 111-112.

[47] Tolan, *Saracens*, 128.

To return to *Gowther,* the emperor's flat refusal of the marriage ultimatum leads instead to a different kind of mixing, the contact that happens in war: "Tho Emperowr, doghtty undur schyld, / With anodur kepped hym in tho fyld" (The emperor, mighty under shield, / With another [army] protected himself in the field. 400-401). Religious bloodshed occurs across all three romances considered in this chapter, but for *Gowther*, war replaces marriage as a place where the two sides join, not to blend cultures and produce new life, but to subjugate and kill. Borders divide even as they conjoin, marking the boundary between spaces as well as the place where they touch. Considering the import of borders more broadly, Susan Friedman writes,

> Border talk is everywhere—literal and figural, material and symbolic…Borders have a way of insisting on separation at the same time as they acknowledge connection. Like bridges. Borders signify the possibility of passing over. They also mark the fact of separation and the distance that has to be crossed. Borders between individuals, genders, groups, and nations erect categorical and material walls between identities.[48]

For *Gowther*, battlefields work similarly, as a site where two hostile and opposed groups meet and mingle at the physical boundary between armies and the symbolic boundary between the identity groups on either side of the conflict. The lengthy battle sequences in *Sir Gowther* visualize the converging of the Christians and the Saracens with prepositions, particularly showing the Christians penetrating their Saracen enemies: "Syr Gwother rode betwene" (Sir Gowther rode between, 471); and again, "Tho Emperowr pryckus into tho pres" (The emperor

[48] Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1998), 3.

spurred into the press, 496). On the other hand, even in the melee the Christian emperor retains his own space bordered by Sir Gowther's spear, keeping the contact paradoxically one-way:

> Syr Gwother, that stythe in stowre,
> Rydys ey with tho Emperour
> And weyrus hym fro wothe;
> Ther was no Sarsyn so mykull of strenthe,
> That durst come within is speyre lenthe. (613-617)

> Sir Gowther, that fierce one in battle,
> Rides always with the emperor
> And protects him from harm;
> There was no Saracen of so much strength,
> That dares come within his spear length.

When the king does briefly suffer capture at line 126, Gowther is there within a couple of lines to decapitate the sultan and rescue the Christian king, swiftly putting an end to the threat. Even as the emperor rides into and penetrates the Saracen enemy, he is protected physically and ideologically from the threats posed by mixing—whether bodily harm in war or a weakening of his identity as a Christian.

This one-way access mirrors the situation of thirteenth-century Jewish communities that were kept isolated due to fears about contamination and conversion in Christian communities with specific clothing and bans on having Christian servants, but also kept available to Christian

preachers to encourage conversion from Judaism. [49] *Sir Gowther* most strongly shows medieval fears about mixing racial-religious groups, gliding past a denial of cross-cultural marriage and reproduction to linger over scenes of conquest and killing. Nonetheless, moments of marriage and reproduction, or moments when they are avoided, provide a test case for mixing. Monstrous births, in particular, can externalize and make visible something invisible in one of the two parents, offering a commentary on their *kynde*. Conversion, intermarriage, and reproduction are a possible alternative to exterminatory violence; if a monstrous birth results from such a union, as occurs in *King of Tars*, it threatens that alternative by suggesting that some essentialized feature of the converted parent survives the baptism. *Sir Gowther*, however, does not even get that far. Although it constellates the sultan's marriage threat with monstrous births and focuses intensely on the possibility of Sir Gowther changing his essence from evil to good, the romance separates out the marriage threat and firmly positions the Saracens as Other. The sultan will not have a chance to be baptized to become a real contender for the hand of princess. That role will instead be taken over by Gowther, who instead of baptism will receive penance, a sacrament that brings a sinner into the community from much nearer to home.

Accordingly, the monstrous birth in this romance, and the questions the topos raises about exogamy and the tension between inborn attributes and redemption, occur within the community as well. However, the topos nonetheless creates a site for examining the relationship between race and religion. Sir Gowther is the son of a Christian lady and a fiend, raising religious problems but separating them from race. His violent misdeeds particularly invoke religious taboos, such as killing priests:

[49] John Tolan, "Royal Policy and Conversion of Jews to Christianity in Thirteenth-Century Europe" in *Contesting Inter-Religious Conversion in the Medieval World,* ed. Yosi Yisraeli and Yaniv Fox (London: Routledge 2016), 96.

Now is he Duke of greyt renown,
And men of holy kyrke dynggus down
Wher he myght hom mete.
Masse ne matens wold he non here
Nor no prechyng of no frere. (169-173)

Now is he a duke of great renown,
And men of holy church he smites down
Wherever he might meet them.
Mass nor matins would he hear,
Nor the preaching of any friar.

Gowther's demonic behavior ultimately isolates him from the Christian community: "All that ever on Cryst con lefe, / Yong and old, he con hom greve / In all that he myght doo" (All that ever believe in Christ, / Young and old, he made them grieve / In all that he might do, 193-195). However, Gowther can "convert" in a way that the Saracens in the romance cannot.

Gowther's immorality initially appears to be inborn and hereditary, and thus perhaps inevitable. "Erly and late, lowde and styll, / He wold wyrke is fadur wyll / Wher he stod or sete" (Early and late, loud and quiet, / He would work his father's will / Whether he stood or sat, 175-177), Gowther behaves wickedly like his father in spite of being raised in a Christian community with no knowledge of his true parentage. Sir Gowther commits extreme acts of violence, particularly religious coded violence, that come right up to the line of what is too taboo to portray in a romance. The text survives in two manuscripts, British Library Royal MS 17.B.43

and National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1, both late 15th-century but the Royal MS perhaps slightly later. The Royal MS omits a brief passage in which Sir Gowther and his men rape a group of nuns, which in MS Advocates reads, “Thei wer full ferd of his body, / For he and is men bothe leyn hom by – / Tho sothe why shuld y hyde?” (They were very afraid of his body, / For he and his men both lay with them – / Why should I hide the truth? 186-189). Royal MS cuts to the next scene in MS Advocates in which Gowther locks them in the convent and burns them alive, an egregious act of violence that is apparently still not as offensive as the rape scene, the inclusion of which the Advocates MS justifies with a defiant rhetorical question. The editors intervene at line 186 to observe, “That the prioress and her charges should be frightened of Gowther's body underscores his diabolical appearance,” but the sense here seems to elide monstrous physical appearance with monstrous behavior. The clause “Thei wer full ferd of his body” finds explanation in the next line, “For he and is men bothe leyn hom by,” which could either suggest a reason for the nuns’ terror or that they are seeing more of Gowther’s body than is normally exposed: the scene is paradoxically both explicit and vague.

Similarly, in an earlier episode Gowther's body seems monstrous when, as an infant, he kills nine wetnurses: "He sowkyd hom so thei lost ther lyvys" (he sucked them so they lost their lives. 113). When his mother offers her breast, "He snaffulld to hit soo / He rofe tho hed from tho brest" (he snuffled to it so / he ripped the nipple from the breast, 129-130). Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, the editors, intervene with a note suggesting that this passage indicates early dentition, a physical manifestation of monstrosity. However, the text does not explicitly name teeth or the action of biting; as Dana Oswold observes, the verb "snaffulld" seems to be unique to this text and "suggests a desperate rooting."[50] Here as in the rape scene, the monstrosity of

[50] Dana Oswold, *Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 168.

Gowther's body is more in its effect on others; his specific physical appearance remains indefinite. The vagueness around Gowther's body—whether it is monstrous in its actions or its physical attributes—works to conflate physical characteristics with behavior, naturalizing Sir Gowther's evil yet, at the same time, resisting the sort of focus on physical appearance necessary for racialization.

It is no accident that the violence against the nuns, as with much of the other violence rehearsed in the romance, takes on a particularly religious dimension. Sir Gowther's body and behavior blur together, both of a *kynde*, and together also serve to separate him from Christian *kynde*. The romance introduces a specifically hereditary term, again connected with Gowther's behavior, when an earl asks, "Syr, why dose thu soo? / We howpe thu come never of Cryston stryn, / But art sum fendys son, we weyn" (Sir, why do you act so? / We think you come not of Christian strain, / But are some fiend's son, we believe, 207-210). Here, Gowther's behavior finds explanation in his breeding, and fiends become a sort of supernatural race, capable of producing a strain of descendants with inborn qualities. The word *stryn* is similar to *kynde*, but it has a narrower and at times more technical meaning that gets closer to the literal idea of breeding, signifying strongly a kinship group by birth.[51] The earl also speaks with the plural pronoun "we," alluding to a collective that Gowther is excluded from. However, in another sense, Gowther belongs to the Christian community and white-Christian race in a way the

[51]The relationship of "stryn" to *kynde* can be seen in this example from the 12th-century *Ormulum: "*Godess Sune shollde mann Inn hire wambe wurrþenn, Off hire flæsh, off hire blod, Off hire streness kinde." (*The Ormulum*, ed. R. Holt (Clarendon Press, 1878), l. 2362). In an example of the word's "breeding" connotation, the Lincoln's Inn MS of the late-13th century romance *Arthour and Merlin* uses the word to express Merlin's demonic parentage, "A knawe-child bore þer was...wiþowten monnes streone" whereas the Auchinleck uses instead the word "biȝeteing" (*Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ed. O. D. Macrae-Gibson, Early English Text Society, Original Series 268 (1973), l. 549). Though *stryn* need not necessarily have a negative connotation, it seems interesting that the same somewhat uncommon word appears in these two texts about heroes with demonic parentage. For a reading of *gens* as a culturally constructed ethnic group, see Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change 950-1350* (London: Penguin Books 1993).

Saracens of the romance cannot. While *King of Tars* heals its monstrous child with baptism, Gowther finds his redemption in confession—a significant departure.

In the earliest days of the Church, baptism and penance were closely linked. In the early church period through the high patristic age, penance involved excommunication, marking the sinner's separation from the Church, and was a public affair.[52] In the Council of Nicea, the Church explicitly made a parallel between baptism and penance to justify its authority to forgive sins; again, there is a sense that sinning causes a loss of salvation but also by the same token a loss of community with the Church. Karl Rahner writes:

> There is an awareness that both the public and the secret destroying of the relationship to the Church by sin is a forfeiting of salvation. Thus there is often an anxious effort to achieve reconciliation with the Church just before death. In so far as the Church's activity is explained not only with reference to Christ's commission, the *pax cum ecclesia* is considered the means of reconciliation with god. Reconciliation always means reconciliation with the Church.

This process of excommunication and then reintegration into the Church community parallels the process of baptism, which also brings someone into Christianity from outside of the Church. Both sacraments also involve the forgiveness of sin. So closely related are these sacraments that, for example, Tertullian rejected the idea that the Church could provide sacramental forgiveness for capital sins. According to Karl Rahner,

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[52] Karl Rahner, *Penance in the Early Church: Theological Investigations XV,* trans. Lionel Swain (New York: Crossroad 1982), 11-12.

> The forgiveness which is impossible is that through an act of the hierarchical Church, that is, of a bishop, such as is the case in baptism as the Church's sacramental application of Christ's redemption. It is only this possibility which, according to Turtullian, would jeopardize the definitive nature of baptism, which alone can give sacramental grace.[53]

The close theological and conceptual relationship between these sacraments carries over to their deployment in romance, too. In a narrative that combines the monstrous birth topos with the sultan's marriage topos, albeit in a different order than appears in *King of Tars* and The Man of Law's Tale, *Sir Gowther* offers a twist on the idea of baptism, which would bring a non-Christian into the fold, by emphasizing instead penance. Unlike the baptism of the monstrous birth in *King of Tars*, *Gowther* submits its own monstrous birth to penance: Gowther is an outsider, and indeed an outsider by birth. Yet, at the same time, he is still born into the Christian community in a way that Saracens are not.

Gowther's declaration of his intention to seek penance captures the tension between his Otherness and belonging: “For y wyll to Rome or that y rest / To lerne anodur lare.” (For I will go to Rome before I rest, / To learn another creed, 236-237). When the princess in *King of Tars* feigns conversion to Islam, the romance uses similar language, but with a distinction:

> And thei sche al the lawes couthe
> And seyde hem openliche with hir mouthe,
> Jhesu forgat sche nought. (502-504)

[53] Rahner, *Penance in the Early Church*, 340.

And though she knew all the creed
And said it outwardly with her mouth,
Jesus forgot she not.

Learning the law is necessary for conversion but not sufficient. For the romances, true Christianity seems to involve an interior state that is invisible, a fact at odds with the racialization of Saracens. In one sense, Gowther must convert to Christianity by learning its law; but in another, he is already a Christian, or else the sacrament in question would be baptism rather than confession. Indeed, upon telling the pope of his parentage, the pope asks him, "'Art thou Crystond?' He seyd, 'Yey, / My name it is Gwother; / Now I lowve God.'" ('Are you Christian?' He said, 'Yes, / My name is Gowther; / Now I love God', 277-280). Gowther's status is uncertain, and his answer a little strange. Though Gowther has been born to a Christian family and christened as a youngster, he equates Christianity with an affective state rather than a sacramental one, or even a state of belief. Gowther's definition of a Christian—that to be a Christian is to love God—qualifies the knight at present, but suggests that in the past, Gowther was *not* a Christian, even though he was baptized as one. The pope takes the unusual step of verifying that the penitent is Christian, and although Gowther answers in the affirmative, he qualifies his statement with the adverb "now," conceding his former state of separation from God and Christianity even as he asserts his current identity as a Christian. The ambiguity of Gowther's *kynde* reflects his hybrid parentage. If a young Gowther did not love God, can this be attributed to his demonic parentage in the same way that the romance attributes his unruly appetites and

violent deeds? Perhaps Gowther has one foot in Christian *kynde* and one outside of it precisely because of his dual heritage.

The romance plays on the connection between confession and baptism, ostensibly sending Gowther to seek penance while using the language of conversion—yet notably not creating narrative space for the sultan to receive baptism or to father a child who will receive baptism. If the romance isn't quite ready to imagine the sultan converting to Christianity to become an appropriate husband for the princess, Gowther can act as a foil representing both the monstrous birth so often threatened by the sultan's marriage threat topos *and* the new convert the sultan otherwise might become. *Gowther* offers limited imaginative space for experimenting with how the sultan might change *kynde*, focusing instead on Gowther's own ambivalent status. Weighing in on the sacramental efficacy of baptism is outside of the scope of romance, but *Gowther* seems to ask whether baptism has been effective at bringing its hero into the Christian community that he *seems* to belong to but hasn't fully been a part of.

Part of Sir Gowther's penance is to remain silent and to only eat the food he gets from the mouths of dogs. These actions firstly mark Gowther's separation from the Christian community, lowering him to the level of animal by depriving him of human speech and food. Accordingly, Gowther departs to the wilderness:

> He went owt of that ceté
> Into anodur far cuntré,
> Tho testamentys thus thei sey;
> He seyt hym down undur a hyll. (307-310)

He went out of that city

Into another far country,

The testaments say thus;

He sat down under a hill.

He leaves the human space of the city for a landscape devoid of human structures, where a greyhound arrives to miraculously feed him for three days. Gowther's association with dogs represents his humbling below a human level, and it also associates him with non-Christians, often called by the epithet "heathen hound." However, the aristocratic breed of the dog that comes to Gowther's aid differentiates this association from dogs in general and foreshadows Gowther's reintegration into the Christian community.

The silence portion of Sir Gowther's penance adds to his dehumanization and furthers his separation from society. His voyage to Rome and subsequent wanderings far from home also have the effect of removing Sir Gowther from the environs in which Gowther is known. The pope recognizes Sir Gowther only after hearing his place of origin and his name, "For ellus y most a traveld thedur / Apon the for to weyre, / For thu hast Holy Kyrke destryed." (For else I must have traveled there, / To war upon you, / For you have destroyed a holy church, 281-283). Sir Gowther's sins are notorious enough to command the pope's attention and perhaps intervention, but at this remove from his home he is only known through his speech, not his person. In the "far cuntré" he travels to Gowther is presumably even at home. The lord Gowther encounters reacts to his silence by correctly inferring, "And yett mey happon thoro sum chans / That it wer gyffon hym in penans" (And yet it may happen through some chance / That it was given to him in penance, 346-347), but no one seems to know the nature of Gowther's sins.

Under the system of private confession developed by the Celtic Church, penance might involve fasting, vigils, prayer, almsgiving, or other acts that could be performed in private.[54] Gowther's silence, however, is profoundly social, or rather asocial—it cannot pass unnoticed, much like his peculiar eating habits, but it also prevents him from communicating his identity, his sins, or the very fact that he is performing penance. Gowther's silence turns his focus inward, while his prohibition on eating from his own hand or from the hands of others cuts him off from the community of the eating table. Gowther is caught in a liminal space between community and isolation: in the lord's hall, but beneath the table with the dogs. Sir Gowther's uneasy position mirrors the uncertainty of his identity at the margins of Christian *kynde*.

In contrast with Sir Gowther's imposed silence, however, the princess is naturally mute; she "Was too soo dompe as hee; / Scho wold have spokyn and might noght" (Was also as mute as he; / She would have spoken and could not, 375-376). The princess's muteness seems to lack the signifying power of Sir Gowther's silence to hint to the lord at his penance and mark his separation from society. However, it creates an affinity between the two that foreshadows their eventual marriage, uniting them in the meantime in a tiny, silent community of two. The connection of their silence, combined with the difference of its signification, comes to a head when Gowther is wounded:

> Ther come a Sarsyn with a speyre,
> Thro tho scholdur smott Gotheyr.
> Then made the dompe meydon mon;
> For sorro fell owt of hur toure. (634-637)

[54] Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 41.

There came a Saracen with a spear,

Through the shoulder smote Gowther.

Then the mute maiden made moan;

For sorrow she fell out of her tower.

The moan that Gowther cannot let out lest he break his vow instead finds expression in the voice of the princess, whose restored speech comes to indicate Gowther's divine forgiveness in contrast to his silence that signals his penance. The knight's wounding also finds a mirror in the princess's tumble from the tower. Her terrible fall prompts another return to the penance motif as the kingdom's barons are sent to bring the pope and cardinals, who arrive "to assoyle that swett thyng" (to absolve that sweet thing, 656), a deathbed absolution that evokes both last rights and penance.

Miraculously, the princess recovers and begins to speak, bringing Sir Gowther's sin and penance full circle and deciding at last the nature of his *kynde*. As the princess returns to life, Sir Gowther is restored to community life and his Christian identity affirmed:

Ho seyd, "My lord of heyvon gretys the well,

And forgyffeus the thi syn yche a dell,

And grantys the tho blys;

And byddus the speyke on hardely,

Eyte and drynke and make mery;

Thu schallt be won of His." (652-666)

She said, ‘My lord of heaven greets you well,

And forgives you your sin each part,

And grants you therefore bliss;

And bids you speak on assuredly,

Eat and drink and make merry;

You shall be one of His.

The princess’s speech makes the connections between Gowther’s penitential prohibitions apparent, as well as linking his penance to his removal from Christian society. Having completed his penance, Gowther is now initiated into the collective “we” voiced by his baron who ventured, “We howpe thu come never of Cryston stryn” (208). The pope further confirms Gowther’s status as one of Christian *kynde*, adding, “Now art thu Goddus chyld; / The thar not dowt tho warlocke wyld” (Now are you God’s child; / You need not fear the wild devil, 673-674). He brings back the question of parentage, effectively rewriting Gowther’s paternity to fit his new *kynde*. Penance is a strange and somewhat uneasy fit for this transformation; marriage might confer new parents in the form of in-laws and baptism in the form of godparents, but penance specifically pertains to those already in the Christian community so wouldn’t typically entail the sort of *kynde*-change suggested by a change in parentage. Lineage is a particularly potent marker of *kynde*, capturing as it does *kynde*’s association with social class, tribe or family, nation, species, and race. *Sir Gowther* imagines religious *kynde* as highly lineal, perhaps even inborn. Its association with race is close, and *Sir Gowther* must find a quasi-Christian, half-demonic knight onto whom to displace the sultan’s marriage threat: the final scene of divine forgiveness quickly gives way to a

marriage in which Gowther and the princess wed. Gowther himself is also a substitute for the monstrously mixed child threatened by the union of a Saracen and a Christian. In its avoidance of realizing such a marriage, *Sir Gowther* suggests that it may be easier to imagine the possibilities and even desirableness of rehabilitating a monstrous half-Christian even as it tries to find ways to visualize the borders of Christian *kynde*. By bringing its marginal case, Sir Gowther, back into the fold via penance, even after he has been baptized—rather than a more Other protagonist via baptism—the romance seems to turn away from the possibility of baptism offering a way to change one's *kynde*, suggesting a greater essentialization of religion and racialization of Saracens.

III. "Sent to Straunge Nacioun": The Man of Law's Tale

Whereas *Sir Gowther* raises the sultan's marriage threat topos only to displace the marriage and monstrous birth onto the person of Sir Gowther, Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale allows the marriage between the sultan and the Christian princess to go forward, though it again displaces the monstrous birth. In this tale, the most famous of the Constance group of romances, a Christian senator's daughter from Rome is married to a Syrian sultan, who unlike most romance sultans has voluntarily converted to Christianity to facilitate the marriage rather than seizing the maiden by force. However, another classic villain steps in to take on the role of the ferocious Saracen: Custance's would-be mother-in-law, who feigns conversion to Christianity only to slaughter the sultan and all of the other converts and exile Custance in a rudderless boat. Custance arrives in pagan England where she sets about converting the locals and marrying the king, only to be accused by her new mother-in-law of bringing forth a monstrous birth and set to

sea again in another rudderless boat which eventually takes her to Rome, where she reunites with her father and later her husband.

From the beginning, The Man of Law's Tale allows the marriage of Custance to the sultan to take place, although the latter must convert first. This logic suggests that inter-religious marriage may not be possible, but marriage across racial lines is, thus creating a distinction between racial and religious formations of difference. The romance initially seems to take for granted both that the sultan can convert, and that he must in order to marry Custance. However, cracks quickly form in this premise. The people of Rome with a common voice "wolde she were of al Europe the queen," but instead Custance is sent to Syria with much dolor.[55] The sultan's conversion should remove the impediment to marriage by rendering the two of the same religion, but there remain differences between the two that don't render marriage invalid but do make it uncomfortable. The poem attributes these differences to geographic distance and something vaguely referred to as the sultan's "condition":

> Allas, what wonder is it thogh she wepte,
> That shal be sent to straunge nacioun,
> Fro freendes that so tendrely hire kepte,
> And to be bounde under subjeccioun
> Of oon, she knoweth noght his condicioun? (267-271)

> Alas, what wonder is it that she wept,
> That shall be sent to a strange nation,

[55] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005), l. 160. Future citations will occur in text.

From friends that so tenderly kept her,

And to be bound under subjection

Of one, she knows not his condition?

"Condition" is a is a somewhat general concept referring to individual disposition, as in *Pricke of Conscience:* "Als tyte als a man waxes alde...Þan chaunges his complexcion And his maners and his condicion" (As soon as a man grows old...Then changes his complexion and his manners and his *condicion*) or in this usage in *Confessio Amantis:* "Thi condicioun, The which is chaste and ful of feith" (Your *condicioun*, the which is chaste and full of faith).[56] Condition, clearly, has much in common with the concept of *kynde* and allows the romance to sidestep the issue of the sultan's conversion to insist that his nature is still suspect. It could refer to the sultan's temperament or humoral complexion in the way that a young bride might dread any husband she has never met, but here the romance insists particularly on geography. Instead of becoming the queen of Europe, Custance is sent "'Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun" (Alas, unto the barbarous nation, 281). The word "Barbre," giving us the modern "barbarian," again makes a statement about *kynde* that muddies religion with other categories. According to the MED, "barbar" can have a religious meaning, as in this passage from the Wycliffite Bible: "Sothli barbaris, or hethene men, ȝauen to vs not litil humanyte. " (Truly *barbaris*, or heathen men, give to us no little humanity).[57] It can have a linguistic sense: "If I schal not knowe the vertu of vois, I schal be to him to whom I schal speke a barbar, or not vndirstondun; and he that spekith, to me a barbar"

[56] *The Pricke of Conscience*, ed. R. Morris, *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1863); *The English Works of John Gower,* ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols., *Early English Text Society, Extra Series* 81 (1900; reprint 1978); 82 (1901).

[57] *The Holy Bible ... by John Wycliffe and His Followers*, eds. J. Forshall and F. Madden, 4 vols. (1850), Deeds 28.1.

(If I shall not know the virtue of voice, I shall be to him to whom I shall speak a *barbar*, or not understood; and he that speaks to me a *barbar*).[58] Or, *barbre* can be national or ethnic, as in this line from *The Wars of Alexander*: " Þai tuke vp þe trumpis...A-grydis grymly to-gedir þe grekes & barbres" (They take up the trumpets...To clash violently together, the Greeks and *barbres*).[59] By following with the noun "nacioun," the romance seems to settle on a geopolitical meaning, and indeed there is no mention of a language barrier. But the specter of religious difference hovers over this ostensibly national problem, even after the sultan's conversion. At least officially, converting a Muslim whether through marriage or otherwise should be a boon for a Christian audience, but the romance invites readers to worry about whether a Saracen's conversion can be trusted.

The Sultan's conversion is strategic, though voluntary, but historically commentators often took up pragmatic conversions that had even less to do with faith than the Sultan's. Both medieval chroniclers and theologians show discomfort with the problems of forced conversions, although they treat it very differently. According to Marcia Colish, the chronicles report forced conversion matter-of-factly, as something expected by both sides of the conflict.[60] In the Baltic Crusades, which took place in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, pagans who accepted baptism after a military defeat regarded their conversion as renegotiable and often reverted to their previous beliefs and practices when their military fortunes changed or when the terms set by Christians changed, a move regarded as duplicitous and planned from the beginning by Christian commentators. However, chroniclers also reveal anxiety about conversion by force by

[58] *The Holy Bible ... by John Wycliffe,* 1Cor1.14.11.

[59] *The Wars of Alexander, an Alliterative Romance,* ed. W. W. Skeat, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 47 (1886; reprint 1973), l. 3611.

[60] Marcia L. Colish, *Faith, Fiction, and Force in Medieval Baptismal Debates* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press: 2014), 271-317.

at times making a case that free will existed in clearly compulsory conversions and highlighting rare instances of baptism freely assented to. One fourteenth-century chronicle, *The Chronicle of Prussia* by Nicolaus von Jeroschin, records repeated instances of forcibly-converted peoples relapsing, along with the chronicler's editorializing commentary:

> In Pomerelia there was a duke called Swantopelk. He was intent on evil and blind to all good. He was the devil's spawn and a son of destruction. His heart and mind were empty of truth and loyalty and full of treachery. This same Swantopelk began to ally himself with the Prussian people who had recently been converted to the faith after many strenuous hard-fought battles. Under the pretense of friendship he secretly negotiated a terrible plot with these Prussians in which they agreed with this sinful man that they would jointly rebel against the brothers and either destroy them or drive them and everything which called itself Christian out of Prussia by force.[61]

Adherence to their old religion (and likely true beliefs) is recast as treachery and evil, and exterminatory violence is attributed to the Prussians rather than the invading Teutonic Knights, whose actions are instead painted as a kind of suffering. Another chronicle, the thirteenth-century *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, records similar recidivism, though Henry tends to be somewhat less vitriolic:

> The neighboring people of Holm cheated Meinhard by making a similar promise. After a fort had been built for them, they profited from their fraud. But at first some were

[61] Nicolaus von Jeroschin, *The Chronicle of Prussia*, trans. Mary Fischer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 89.

> baptized, with whatever sort of intentions...After the second fort had been completed, in their iniquity they forgot their oath and perjured themselves, for there was not even one of them who accepted the faith. Truly the soul of the preacher was disturbed, inasmuchas, by gradually plundering his possessions and beating his household, they decided to drive him outside their borders. They thought that since they had been baptized with water, they could remove their baptism by washing themselves in the Dvina and thus send it back to Germany.[62]

The intentions of the baptizands are again important to the chronicler. Unlike the wicked Swantopelk of Nicolaus von Jeroschin's account, the people of Holm seem to be motivated by profit; their baptism is cast as fraud and part of their relapse involves stealing from the missionary. They also contest the meaning of baptism in a way that anticipates Chaucer's sultaness and dramatizes the problem for Christian writers of how to understand forced or insincere baptism.

Canonists until the beginning of the thirteenth century condemned forced baptism, although they ruled that those forced to convert must nonetheless practice Christianity. Their admonitions, like the failures alluded to in the chronicles, seemingly did little to stop the practice of converting by the sword. However, the theological tide began to turn with Pope Innocent II's distinction "between unwillingness and unwillingness, compulsion and compulsion," in which those who accept baptism under duress, even to avoid direct harm, are still viewed as having

[62] Henry of Livonia, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia,* trans. James A. Brundage (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 27.

willed their baptism. Other theologians built on this concept, tending to shrink the categories of unwillingness and compulsion that would nullify consent.[63] According to Maria Colish,

> Over the course of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, most forced baptisms are reclassified as conditionally compelled, that is, as minimally and then as fully voluntary. Absolute compulsion, with its nugatory sacramental effects, has become increasingly vestigial. The requirement to practice Christianity for the conditionally compelled…has become an advantage, not a problem. Rather than embittering the forced baptizand and hardening his inner resistance, encouraging fraud, hypocrisy, recidivism, and revolt, the compulsory practice of Christianity, like forced baptism itself, has been reconfigured by these masters as a means of conversion, turning the recipient's internal dissent at the font into true assent.[64]

The frustrations of missionaries at the recidivism of those forcibly baptized gradually is forgotten by theologians, who view compulsion at the font and compulsory religious practice afterwards as not only acceptable but salubrious, leading to real faith. This position, its extremity attained little by little as theologians expand on their predecessors, defies both the experience of missionaries and common sense. Many romances of the late Middle Ages react by pivoting in the other direction, asking: Can any baptism from another religion, as opposed to that of a child of Christian parents, be trusted as reflecting the sincere will of the baptizand? Is conversion after all

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[63] Colish, *Faith, Fiction, and Force,* 271-317.

[64] Colish, *Faith, Fiction, and Force,* 316-317.

simply a story of force, even when the enticements are far less extreme than the threats of death hypothesized by theologians?

In the context of the theological problems of forced conversion, the long history of crusading looms large. A few romances literally concern the events of Crusades, such as *Richard Cœur de Lion* and *The Seige of Jerusalem*, as well as a number about the adjacent topic of Roland and his contemporaries.[65] However, many others take up crusading more broadly, drawing from Pope Urban II's speech at Clermont in 1095, which was recorded, copied, and reused throughout the Middle Ages. Across its various iterations, the speech paints Muslims as aggressors conquering lands and terrorizing Christians, against whose violence the Crusades are an act of defense or vengeance. Alongside the military and geopolitical the speech emphasizes personal spiritual salvation and the redirection of otherwise inappropriate knightly violence.[66] In spite of the crusades' growing disorganization and military failures in the late Middle Ages, crusading ideology lingered and the impacts even of the early Crusades continued to be felt throughout the period. Timothy Venning writes,

> The success of the First Crusade shaped the Middle Ages. It expanded cultural horizons and introduced ideas, goods and technologies from the lands of Islam and from Byzantium to the west. It played a crucial role in the development of chivalry and knightly piety and, in doing so, helped establish the concept of violence as an expression of devotion.[67]

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[65] E.g. *Duke Roland and Sir Otuel of Spain, Firumbras, Otuel a Knight, Otuel and Roland, Roland and Vernagu,* the Middle English *Song of Roland,* and *Sultan of Babylon*. See also Heng, *Empire of Magic*.

[66] Lee Manion, *Narrating the Crusades: Loss and Recovery in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2014), 6-14.

The failures of later Crusades, felt particularly keenly in contrast to earlier conquests, drove literary production that grappled with the problems, from the practical to the spiritual, of the crusades.

> One of the most characteristic literary genres of the later middle ages could be described as 'recovery literature', books pamphlets and memoranda concerned with the crusade, the restoration of Jerusalem and the advance of the Turks…The mountain of written advice thrown up in the two centuries after 1291 consistently associated the recovery of the Holy Land or the defence of the church with personal redemption, honour and the resolution of Europe's internal political, social and religious problems.[68]

Clearly, the crusades continued to exert a powerful influence on the culture of the later Middle Ages, conjuring up anxieties about loss even while offering hope of redemption. The romances of this period may not always take a historically specific or literal approach to the crusades, but they do frequently explore more conceptual crusading concerns.

The imperative to convert non-Christians collides with anxieties about false conversion in the Syria of the Man of Law's Tale. The sultan stands out among romance sultans for his willingness to convert to Christianity to marry the heroine, a conversion tactic familiar from early hagiographies. However, the "threat" part of the sultan's marriage threat is merely

[67] Timothy Venning, *A Chronology of the Crusades* (London: Routledge 2015), 1.

[68] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2006), 827.

displaced, not eliminated; the danger here comes from the sultaness, the mother of the sultan, who picks up a strategy familiar from Christianization efforts in the Baltic Crusades.

> We shul first feine us Cristendom to take –
> Coold water shal nat greve us but a lite!
> And I shal swich a feste and revel make
> That, as I trowe, I shal the Sowdan quite.
> For, thogh his wif be cristned never so white,
> She shal have need to wasshe awey the rede,
> Thogh she a font-ful water with her lede. (351-357)

> We shall first feign to take Christiandom –
> Cold water shall not grieve us but a little!
> And I shall such a feast and revel make
> That, as I believe, I shall the sultan fool.
> For, though his wife be christened ever so white,
> She shall have need to wash away the red,
> Though she a font-full of water with her lead.

Although the ostensible target of her deception is the sultan, his mother's plot plays on the fears of medieval Christians about false baptism and raises broader concerns about the motivation for conversion. Pagans who submitted to baptism for reasons of military exigency often reverted to non-Christian practices when circumstances permitted precisely because they were motivated by

circumstance, rather than religious conviction. In the same way a Saracen converting to enable a marriage to go forward, or in the case of those beneath the sultan, because of political pressures, might likewise lack religious conviction and be an unreliable convert. In a kind of verbal desecration, the sultan's mother further dirties baptism with graphic wordplay. The water of baptism is overwhelmed by blood, which in turn contrasts with Custance's whiteness—ostensibly because of her religious purity, but perhaps also suggesting racial undertones. The sultaness's language sets up a choice between baptism and blood, or conversion and extermination, that all three of these romances struggle with, and which asks whether Saracens can ever be Christians—or whether their religious *kynde* is essential and fixed. The violence and blasphemy of the sultaness's language is reminiscent of the indignation of chroniclers at duplicitous, impermanent converts, but the disastrous results of her perfidy and the context of marriage rather than war pushes bigger questions about the theology of conversion.

In contrast to the use of force to convert, marriage was a far less controversial method of evangelism. Gregory of Tours in his *Historia Francorum* idealizes marriages between a Christian and non-Christian noble as a strategy for spreading Christianity in Europe. Bede reports on this method as well, although he begins to show the non-Christian party being expected to convert prior to marriage and suggests that some Christian parents might have had concerns about these arrangements, especially where Christian daughters were concerned. Nonetheless, conversion by marriage persisted into the ninth and tenth centuries. This method appears to have been most effective within Europe, where it increasingly became associated with diplomacy rather than conversion. Conversion by marriage may have been attempted as late as the twelfth century in the context of the Crusades, although without success. In his book *After Lavinia*, John Watkins writes,

> Richard I of England even seems to have considered settling the Crusades through a match between his sister Joan and Saladin's brother. It failed, presumably because of the difference in religion, so it becomes an example of how the same Christian beliefs that integrated Europe limited diplomatic relations with the non-Christian world. [69]

Like the historical crusades, the romances influenced by the crusades also often seem to find a binary choice between conversion and slaughter. As Bernard of Clairvaux proclaimed in connection to the Baltic Crusades, "They shall either be converted or wiped out."[70] In the Man of Law's Tale, conversion and extermination seem to go hand in hand.

Custance arrives in Syria to much pomp and feasting. Whether the festivities mark her arrival or more specifically indicate that the wedding has taken place is unclear, though the Sultaness greets the Roman "[a]s any moder mighte hir doghter deere" (As any mother might her daughter dear, 397). In any event, the union reaches no further than the moment when "[t]he Sowdan and the Cristen everychone / Been al to-hewe and striked at the bord, / But it were oonly dame Custaunce allone" (the sultan and every Christian / were all hewn and struck at the table, / except only dame Custance alone, 429-431). In killing the Christians at the feasting table, the Sultaness preempts the marriage's consummation in the bedchamber, the shocking publicness of the attack blotting out private sexuality and perhaps also making manifest the interior drama of faith, false conversion, and *kynde*. The boundary between race and religion crossed when the sultan converts breaks down, allowing the marriage but preventing consummation and

[69] John Watkins, *After Lavinia: A Literary History of Premodern Marriage Diplomacy* (Cornell UP: 2017), 57-90.

[70] Tyerman, *God's War*, 674.

reproduction. The romance emphasizes the totality of the slaughter with a series of negatives, repeating, "Ne ther nas Surrien noon that was converted, / That of the conseil of the Sowdan woot, / That he nas al to-hewe er he asterted" (Nor was there any Saracen that was converted / That of the counsel of the sultan knew, / but that he was all hewn before he fled, 435-437). The massacre elides the historical presence of a Christian community in Syria, substituting a crusader logic of total territorial and spiritual control by either Christians or Muslims. The two religions seem as unable to mix as oil and water, and Custance is accordingly spat back out from Saracen Syria when she is cast off in a rudderless boat. The particularization that the Syrians that were killed were those that "of the conseil of the Sowdan woot" is somewhat puzzling, seeming to suggest a cohesiveness of the Christian converts, that all are sharing a knowing together with the Sultan. This line may also make space for interior belief and the will, considerations in judging conversion that come into sharper focus in *King of Tars*.

For Carolyn Dinshaw, the problem with the conversion of the Saracens is a bodily one, that the Saracens remain somehow physically Other even after receiving baptism—unlike the sultan in *King of Tars*, who undergoes a physical transformation alongside his spiritual conversion.[71] That difference in bodily form, I argue, expresses a more fundamental and racial difference in *kynde* that cannot be overcome by baptism, a change in religious *kynde*. However, the calculus seems to be different when Custance arrives in pagan Britain. Where the romance finds limits to the sultan's conversion in his mother's false conversion, the difficulty of imagining a legitimate offspring from the union, and the ultimate erasure of Syrian Christians, on the contrary the romance finds exceptions to the paganism of the English. "This constable, and dame Hermengild his wyf, / Were payens, and that contree everywhere. / *But* Hermengild loved

[71] Carolyn Dinshaw, "Pale Faces: Race, Religion, and Affect in Chaucer's Texts and Their Readers," Studies in the Age of Chaucer 23 (2001): 26.

hire right as hir lif," (This constable, and dame Hermengild his wife, / Were pagans, and that country everywhere. / *But* Hermengild loved her as much as her life, 533-535, emphasis mine) allowing Custance to effect the conversion of Hermenguild without the anxieties about false conversion and invalid baptism that attend conversion in Syria. Similarly,

> In al that land no Cristen dorse route;
> Alle Cristen folk been fled fro that contree,
> Thurgh payens that conquereden al aboute
> The plages of the north, by land and see.
> To Walis fledde the Cristyanitee
> Of olde Britons dwelling in this ile;
> Ther was hir refut for the mene-while.
> *But yet* nere Cristene Britons so exiled
> That ther nere somme that in hir privetee
> Honoured Crist and hethen folk bigiled. (540-549, emphasis mine.)

> In all that land no Christian dared assemble;
> All Christian folk had fled from that country,
> Because of pagans that conquered all about
> The shores of the north, by land and sea.
> To Wales fled the Christianity
> Of old Britons dwelling in this isle;
> There was their refuge for the meanwhile.

But yet Christian Britons were not so exiled
That there were not some that in their privacy
Honored Christ and heathen folk beguiled.

In both of these instances, adversatives contain the damage of English paganism by suggesting an underlying affinity for Christianity. This passage also reverses the false conversion enacted in Syria suggesting secret underlying Islam, creating instead the suspicion that the English may really be Christian Britons. In this passage Christianity is explicitly associated with the Britons and Celtic Wales, implying a racial or ethnic dimension to religion, yet one faint enough that Christian Britons can remain secretly among the pagans, who are English or perhaps Norse, given the setting in Northumberland. The subtle gradations of *kynde* visible in this vision of England are unusual for a romance; more typical is the monolithic Syria, in which no Christians or Jews seem to mingle with the Muslim locals and no ethnic variation is visible. Chaucer even acknowledges the problem of language in the context of England, noting, "A maner Latin corrupt was hir speche, / But algates therby was she understonde" (A manner of corrupt Latin was their speech, / But in any case thereby was she understood, 519-520) This linguistic affinity ties together Rome and England both in terms of *kynde* and *translatio imperii*. The romance works to find the proper place for Custance, whom the Roman commoners believe should be "of al Europe the queene!" (161). The imperial bond between Rome and England is sealed when Maurice, the son of Custance and King Alla, is anointed Roman Emperor by the Pope in a move that not only links the two places, but also the Church with empire (1121-1122). Syria, conspicuously, does not receive this treatment and remains outside of Custance's proper world. Accordingly, the romance moves, though the inclusion of a miracle, to allow King Alla to

convert in earnest and marry Custance. Can only a miracle inspire the genuine faith necessary for a true conversion? Perhaps, but Chaucer makes a choice to have the miracle occur in England, unlike *King of Tars* which places a miracle in the sultanate. The romance establishes that the seeds of Christianity already exist in England before Custance's miracle. And even with these aids, as in so many other romances that struggle with marriage across lines of *kynde*, a monstrous birth results.

Unlike in the birth of Sir Gowther, the monstrous birth in the Man of Law's Tale is fictitious, overlapping with the accused queen topos when another wicked mother-in-law forges a letter to King Alla. The monstrous birth in Man of Law resembles that of *Gowther*, invoking the supernatural and creating a gap between the individual and the community:

> The lettre spak the queen delivered was
> Of so horrible a fendlich creature
> That in the castel noon so hardy was
> That any while dorste ther endure.
> The moder was an elf, by aventure
> Ycome, by charmes or by sorcerye,
> And every wight hateth hir compaignye. (750-756)

> The letter said the queen was delivered
> Of so horrible a fiendish creature
> That in the castle none was so hardy
> That any while dared to endure there.

The mother was an elf, by chance
Come, by charms or by sorcery,
And every person hated her company.

Here the monstrous birth adopts a strongly gendered direction, but unlike in *Gowther*, the accusation is not that Custance has committed adultery, but that she herself is a supernatural creature and an outsider. Instead, the alleged monstrous birth plays out what could not happen in Syria: an outsider, to appearances an appropriate match, is married and the offspring's monstrous nature reveals the inappropriateness of the match. The Otherness of the baby and mother demands separation, so that none of the locals can be near them and the situation can only be rectified by expelling the outsiders from the community. In casting Custance out, this monstrous birth also sidesteps the issue of English religion, focusing instead on Custance's *kynde*. It enacts a double displacement, first from the initial Syrian marriage to England, and secondly from the converting husbands to the wife. Perhaps surprisingly, Custance's Otherness takes on a Celtic dimension, drawing on the language of elves and magic, despite the romance's insistence that the Celtic Britons are Christians in contrast with the pagan Norse or English rulers. Perhaps Custance's characterization here draws on an especially strong impulse to disavow Celtic paganism and assert Christianity, thereby heightening the drive to expel Custance.

The episode also obscures the underlying birth: the union of Custance and King Alla has brought forth a healthy baby boy, something the characters in *King of Tars* are unable to do and which the Man of Law's Tale doesn't allow Custance's first marriage to even attempt. If monstrous births signpost the dangers of exogamous marriages, the monstrous birth in Man of Law suggests what might have happened with the Syrian sultan—but didn't happen with the

English king. Both were recent converts when they married Custance, but the treatment those conversions receive differ sharply. In considering whether religious conversion is really possible, Man of Law hedges. It locates acceptable (even heroic) conversion in the past, with Chaucer's own ancestors in England, aided by a miracle. In Syria, where Muslims existed in Chaucer's own day and where the crusades were a recent (and ongoing) memory, lasting conversion is fraught, plagued by questions of sincerity and perhaps, as in *Gowther*, doubts about whether baptism can effect a change in *kynde*. The sultan's conversion receives little narratorial comment, but a perverted version of baptism plays out in the rhetoric of the sultaness with disastrous consequences, just as, in another imaginary space, King Alla's mother envisions the kind of monstrous birth that might occur from a marriage with an outsider.

While the monstrous birth in The Man of Law's Tale happens only in the wicked hoax of the mother-in-law, not in "fact," the occurrence of this topos even in a hypothetical space encourages the audience to consider what might be at stake in cross-*kynde* unions. Besides being an identity category, the word *kynde* is often deployed as an adjective to express the "true" heir. For example, in *William of Palerne*, a text I will discuss in greater detail in chapter three, a wicked stepmother considers the status of her son, the king's second son:

> and þis þanne þouȝt sche þroly, þat it no schuld never
> kuvere to be king þer as þe kinde eyre,
> whille þe kinges ferst sone were þer alive. (127-129)

> and this then thought she fiercely, that he should never
> prevail to be king there as the *kinde* heir,

while the king's first son were there alive.

Kynde can also convey what is natural, and by extension, what is proper and moral. To draw from *William* again, the king recounts his wife's wicked deeds:

> But þan my wif wickedli on þise wise þouȝt,
> þat myn elder sone min eritage schul have,
> and kepe þe kingdom after me, as kinde skil it wold;
> and strived stifli with hireself, as stepmoderes wol alle,
> bi what wise sche miȝt best þat bold barn spille,
> to do so þat here sone after mi dessece
> miȝte rejoische þat reaume as riȝt eir bi kinde. (4096-4102)

> But then my wife wickedly thought in this manner,
> that my elder son my heritage shall have,
> and keep the kingdom after me, as *kinde* reason would have it;
> and strove staunchly with herself, as stepmothers all will,
> by what wise she might best kill that bold baby,
> to do so that her son after my decease
> might rule that realm as the right heir by *kinde*.

The sense of "kinde skil" draws on the idea of natural knowledge, perhaps common sense, or what Madeleine Kasten describes, in the context of *Piers Plowman*, as "'natural', 'intuitive'

knowledge – of Truth. His use of the adjective 'kynde' indicates that he conceives of this desirable knowledge as being of an affective rather than an abstract nature."[72] "Kinde skil" expresses what is intuitive because it is both natural and proper. Ironically, the stepmother (acting true to her own *kynde* as a wicked stepmother) can alter the *kynde* succession through the decidedly improper, even unnatural deployment of violence against her stepson. While I will consider *William of Palerne* in greater detail later, I introduce it here to convey the freighted entanglements of the concept of *kynde* with inheritance and succession. For The Man of Law's Tale and the other romances under consideration in this chapter, monstrous births pose a threat to *kynde* succession and in so doing, may expose a parent or a match of two parents as unnatural, improper, immoral. A "fendliche creature" like the supposed child of Custance and Alla is very clearly no *kynde* heir. The romance imagines what might cause such a misbirth—certainly a pairing between an elf-woman and a human man. But by interrupting the marriage of Custance and the sultan, the romance also asks us to speculate what the fruit of that union might have been—a birth that does not receive the imaginative space that the mother-in-law gives to Custance's child by Alla. In playing with and playing out these imaginary scenarios, the romance invites its audience, too, to imagine the boundaries separating appropriate from inappropriate matches and *kynde* from *kynde*, and to consider how and when *kynde* boundaries can be crossed—and what consequences might follow.

III. "For Thi Bileve It Farth So": The Lump Baby in *The King of Tars*

[72] Madeleine Kasten, *In Search of "Kynde Knowynge":* Piers Plowman *and the Origin of Allegory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 67.

Of the three romances discussed in this chapter, *King of Tars* allows the marriage plot and monstrous birth to progress the farthest, giving troubling conversions the most space to play out. A conflict that is by now familiar begins: the Saracen Sultan of Damas, hearing of the great beauty of a Christian princess, seeks her hand in marriage, waging war when it is refused. This princess, daughter of the King of Tars (possibly Tartary, Tharsia, or Tarsus though the exact meaning is obscure),[73] bravely sacrifices herself to save her father's kingdom. She marries the sultan and experiences a troubling dream in which she is pursued by black hounds but ultimately receives reassurance when one transforms into a man and promises that Christ will protect her. The princess feigns conversion to Islam and becomes pregnant, but the baby is born a featureless and lifeless lump of flesh. The sultan accuses her of insincere conversion, but she counters that his false faith is the cause. He petitions his gods to bring the lump to life but fails. The princess has the lump baptized, and it becomes a perfect baby. Persuaded by the miracle, the sultan too receives baptism and his skin transforms from black to white. At the conclusion of the romance, the sultan converts or executes his subjects and, together with the king of Tars, fights off five Saracen kings. It is striking that in this romance the Christian princess pretends to convert, the closest we come to the possibility of conversion *away* from Christianity across all three romances. *Tars* also allows marriage and consummation to happen, moving a degree past Man of Law and two past *Gowther* to realize miscegenation. However, a limit remains: procreation becomes the new site for *kynde* trouble. Like *Gowther* and numerous other medieval texts, *Tars* uses the word "hunde" throughout to describe the Saracens, dehumanizing them and stretching exogamy to imply animal-human relations. The extreme difference between the princess and the

[73] Sierra Lomuto, "The Mongol Princess of Tars: Global Relations and Racial Formation in The King of Tars (c. 1330)," *Exemplaria* 31, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 171–92.

sultan is ostensibly one of religion, resulting in a lump child with no form, no life, no humanity. However, race is closely implicated as well. In this romance, race, religion, monstrous birth, baptism, and conversion collide within a brief narrative space to reveal the constructed nature of race.

Like the other romances, *King of Tars* shows anxiety about contact across *kynde*. In addition to the couple's limited ability to procreate due to their differences in *kynde*, the romance also resolves with bloodshed similar to that in *Sir Gowther*. Intermarriage, the sultan's conversion, and the possibility that the princess might convert show more possibilities for mixing than *Gowther*, but the ultimate goal of the romance is still Christian domination, in this case initiated by a risky marriage. In debating with his wife the best course of action, the King of Tars underscores the seriousness of the situation.

> He seyd, "Dame, our douhter hath ment
> To the soudan to wende.
> Do loke what rede is now at thee
> For now er here bot we thre
> To save Cristen kende." (257-261)

> He said, "Dame, our daughter intends
> To go to the sultan.
> Do look what advice is given to you,
> For now there are only we three
> To save Christian kind."

In a note on line 261, Chandler argues,

> There is no easy gloss for this word, which is like the Latin term *gens*. It indicates a group and can variously mean ‘kind,’ ‘species,’ or, most commonly, ‘nature’ in the sense of ‘essential characteristics.’ But its use here, ‘Cristen kende,’ suggests a group that is not genetic but spiritual, and I have glossed [as “people”] accordingly.

While Chandler's definition is good, I would argue that "kinde" is never truly genetic because medieval England had no study of genetics in the modern sense; racialization on genetic grounds is a modern phenomenon, and far from the only way that race can be imagined. The sense of species likely carries some force, given the romance’s frequent use of hound language and the appearance of a hound in a dream to characterize the Saracens. Further, as this chapter has shown, the division between spiritual and racial groups is far from clear for this period. The use of this phrase also captures the totality of the threat made by the sultan’s attacks. The sultan’s onslaught seems to overflow the political boundaries of the kingdom whose princess’s hand he would extort and pose a threat to all Christians everywhere. Another threat comes in the form of the possibility of conversion away from Christianity, another kind of attack on Christian *kynde*. As in the other romances, religious difference is an impediment to marriage, but this time, the princess must convert, realizing one of the dangers of religious mixing. The princess’s marriage to the sultan is not enough; without her conversion, the marriage cannot be consummated and therefore fully sealed, prompting the sultan to reiterate his threat:

Thou most bileve opon mi lay

And knele now here adoun

And forsake thi fals lay

That thou hast leved on mani a day,

And anour Seyn Mahoun!

And certes, bot thou wilt anon,

Thi fader Y schal with wer slon (467-473).

You must believe in my faith

And kneel down here

And forsake your false faith

That you have believed in for many days,

And honor Saint Mohammad!

And certainly, unless you do at once,

I will slay your father with war.

The romance asks us to sympathize with its heroine and the terrible, coerced position she finds herself in even though, as we have seen, theologians endorsed the reverse situation, with non-Christians coerced. After navigating these existential threats to the princess and to Christianity, the romance finds a kind of terrible symmetry in its ending, when Islam must face (and succumb to) an existential threat from Christianity.

Near the end of the romance, after the sultan's baptism, the next step follows inexorably: the princess instructs him to send for her father to bring his army, and to convert all of his

subjects or execute those who refuse. In spite of the mixing happening at the top with the marriage between the princess and the sultan, for the kingdom as a whole Christianity and Islam are locked in an existential and binary struggle. After the sultan's conversion, five Muslim kings and their armies gather to make war, swearing, "Ther schuld nought ben his warant / Bot ben drawe and hong" (There should be no protector for him / But he should be drawn and hanged. 1073-1074). But, by the end of the battle it is instead the Saracens who are wiped out: "Ther was non that might him hide / That he nas sleyn in that tide / With fight ogeyn hem stode" (There was none that might hide himself / So that he was not slain in that time / That with arms against them stood, 1210-1212). The newly Christian king cannot rule the Muslim kingdom or release Christian prisoners into the Muslim populace, leading to mixing; instead, one must wholly destroy and replace the other. This act of replacement becomes literal when the sultan empties his prisons of "Ten thousend Cristen men, yplight, / Of mani uncouthe thede," (Ten thousand Christian men, indeed, / Of many unknown people, 1052) ultimately replacing them with even more Muslims: "Thritti thousende ther were take / Of sarrains bothe blo and blac / And don in his prisoun" (Thirty thousand there were taken / Of Saracens both blue and black / And put in his prison) before executing those who refuse to convert (1219-1221). Clearly, though *Tars* is willing to go farther than the other romances in imagining an interfaith marriage proceeding and being consummated, the romance still views the mixing of racial and religious *kyndes* as unstable and potentially violent. History records moments of interreligious mixture and broken marriage outside of literature, as well:

> One lesson that issues from the spectacle of the so-called Martyrs of Córdoba in Umayyad-ruled Andalusia of 850-9, when some fifty Christians were executed, most at

> their own instigation, by order of the *quadi* of Córdoba is that *too much* acculturation—through interfaith marriage and sexual reproduction, linguistic adoptions, cultural mimicry, and stylistic adaptations – elicits violent response as a radical effort by some in the local populace (in this case, those who sought self-martyrdom) to etch clearer and more determinate identity boundaries between populations in close contact.[74]

The interfaith marriage in *King of Tars* is a high-stakes affair, one refused in *Gowther* and stopped short of consummation in *Man of Law*, but its portrayal allows for a more direct exploration of race and religion.

Clothing begins the transformation, showing a part of cultural difference that is far easier to change than religious belief or the form of the body itself. Upon her arrival, before her outward conversion to Islam, the princess changes her clothing: "And richeliche she was cladde / As hethen wiman ware" (And richly she was clad / As heathen women were, 380-381). The princess's dress creates an analogy with religion, changing her outermost appearance to resemble—but not become—a Muslim and a Saracen. The sultan's conversion, a true conversion unlike the princess's, involves the step of removing his clothing before baptism: "The soudan with gode wille anon / Dede off his clothes everichon / To reseyve his baptize" (The sultan with good will at once / Took off all of his clothes / To receive his baptism, 916-918). Clothing reflects culture and is easier to change than belief; in this romance, however, changing clothing also heralds change to the body beneath the clothing.

Questions of bodily form cling to race in *King of Tars*, beginning with the monstrous birth that issues from the princess's marriage to the sultan. After her false conversion and

[74] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 113.

marriage, the princess bears a child that reveals explicitly the dangers of miscegenation that the other romances avert:

> And when the child was ybore,
> Wel sori wimen were therfore,
> For lim no hadde it non,
> Bot as a rond of flesche yschore
> In chaumber it lay hem bifore
> Withouten blod and bon.
> For sorwe the levedi wald dye,
> For it hadde noither nose no eye
> Bot lay ded as the ston. (574-582)

> And when the child was born
> Very sorry were the women therefore,
> For it had no limbs,
> But as a round cut of flesh
> In the chamber in lay before them
> Without blood and bone.
> For sorrow the lady wished to die,
> For it had neither nose nor eye
> But lay dead as the stone.

The child is not a hybrid, but something worse than either parent. In formulations of race centuries later, informed by the global systems of colonialism and slave trade, children of black and white parentage are often legally black but in some way mixed, alternately viewed as more desirable because closer to white in slavery contexts, or banned in anti-miscegenation laws in post-slavery contexts because of the danger of racial mixing weakening the logic of racial hierarchy. This child, by contrast, does not have skin color of a shade between his parents'; in fact, we are told nothing of its skin color, or even whether it has skin. The child is completely indeterminate and featureless, and without any features to essentialize, it lacks race entirely, along with life and recognizable humanity. The child's formlessness, unexpected to the modern reader, also illustrates that questions of form and the racialization of form can manifest in ways that don't anticipate modern understandings of genetics.

Other choices for the form of the baby were possible; in Wolfram von Eschenbach's early thirteenth-century *Parzival*, Parzival's father Gahmuret is a lover to the Black Queen Belakane, a heathen, and their resulting child Firefiz is born piebald, a mix of black and white patches sometimes seen in horses and other animals:

> swenne ir an trûtscheft gebrast,
> ir triwe kôs den dürren ast.
> Diu frouwe an rehter zît genas
> eines suns, der zweier varwe was,
> an dem got anders wart enein:
> wîz und swarzer varwe er schein.
> diu künegîn kust in sundr twâl

vil dicke an sîniu blanken mâl.

diu muoter hiez ir kindelîn

Feirefîz Anschevîn.

der wart ein waltswende.

die tjoste sîner hende

manec sper zebrâchen,

die schilde dürkel stâchen.

*a*ls ein agelster wart gevar

sîn hâr und ouch sîn vel vil gar.[75]

When her time was due the lady gave birth to a son, who was of two colours. By him God devised a miracle – both black and white was his appearance. The queen kissed him incessantly, very often on his white marks. The mother called her baby Feirefiz Angevin. He became a wood-waster – the jousts of his hand shattered many a spear, riddling shields with holes. His hair and his entire skin, too, became like that of a magpie. [76]

Unlike the lump baby of *Tars*, this baby represents the successful (if weird) fruit of a marriage across racial and religious *kyndes*, from a European author perhaps especially radical in his humane portrayal of Saracens. In *Willehalm*, which contains another black-and-white knight, Wolfram narrates a slaughter of Saracens much like those in the romances examined in this chapter and asks a startling question: "die nie toufes künde / enpfiengen, ist daz sünde, / daz man

[75] Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival* ed. Joachim Bumke (Tübingen: Max Niemer, 2008), ll. 1685-1700.

[76] Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival,* trans. Cyril Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18. See also Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* 188-189.

die sluoc alsam ein vihe?" (Is it a sin to slaughter like cattle those who have never received baptism?)[77] The English romances considered here seem to treat this kind of exterminatory violence as far less troubling than the threats of intermarriage that precede them, yet Wolfram answers his own question, "grozer sünde ich drumbe gihe: / ez ist gar gotes hantgetat, / zwuo und sibenzec sprache, die er hat" (I say it is a great sin, for they are all the creatures of God's Hand, and He maintains them, with their seventy-two languages).[78]

The formlessness and lifelessness of the child in *King of Tars* signals that, unlike in Wolfram's romances, the marriage across *kyndes* is the crux and center of anxiety. Form itself is a kind of *kynde*, constituting part of the essential nature of a person. The piebald knight in *Parzival* is a viable but imperfect mixture of two *kyndes*, with two colors existing side by side in the son representing both parents as discrete rather than blended contributors. The formlessness of the lump baby in *Tars* is a complete failure to mix, a sign that its two parents' *kyndes* are incompatible. However, although form tells us something about the essential nature of a person, it can be changed, for good or ill. A change of form is ominous in *Sir Gowther,* signaling a kind of deception in the nature of fiends:

> Sumtyme the fende hadde postee
> For to dele with ladies free

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[77] Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm,* ed. Werner Schröder (1978; reis. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2019), IX: 450, ll. 15-17; Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm,* trans. Marion E. Gibbs and Sidney M. Johnson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1984), 218.

[78] Eschenbach, *Willehalm,* IX: 450, ll. 18-20; Eschenbach, *Willehalm* 72. See also Albrecht Classen, "Confrontation with the Foreign World of the East: Saracen Princesses in Medieval German Narratives" *Orbis Litterarum* 53: 277-295, 1988, 288.

In liknesse of here fere,

So that he bigat Merlyng and mo

And wrought ladies so mikil wo

That ferly it is to here.

A selcowgh thing that is to here,

That fend nyeght wemen nere

And maked hom with chyld;

Tho kynde of men wher thei hit tane,

For of hom selfe had thei nan. (7-17)

Sometimes the fiend had power

To deal with noble ladies

In the likeness of their spouse

So that he begat Merlin and more

And wrought ladies so much woe

That wondrous it is to hear.

A marvelous thing it is to hear,

That fiend lay with women

And made them with child;

Then the *kynde* of men they took there,

For of themselves they had none.

Kynde, here perhaps "form," seems to be somehow an inherently human quality, one denied to demons. The fiend's ability to change form is a way to trick women into sin, who presumably would not sleep with devils without the deception. In *Tars*, while the lump baby's formlessness is troubling, a change in form or *kynde* is not demonic but miraculous.

The explanation offered in the romance for the couple's failure to conceive a viable child is the difference in religion. The sultan sees the child and immediately reads its formlessness as proof that his wife's conversion is a sham:

> With right resoun Y preve
> The childe that is here of thee born
> Bothe lim and lith it is forlorn
> Alle thurth thi fals bileve! (588-591)

> With right reason I prove
> The child that is here born of you
> Both limb and joint it has lost
> All through your false belief!

According to the MED, "forlorn" is to be deprived of something as a punishment, but also to lose a quality or one's nature.[79] There is a sense that the would-be baby's *kynde* has been lost; it has become tragically formless like the demons of *Sir Gowther* in a kind of damnation in which soul and bodily form are linked. But there is also a more legalistic sense. While "lith" means limb, it

[79] *MED* s.v. forlēsen

can also mean a landed property, and often appears in the set phrase "lond and lith," similar to the "lim and lith" here.[80] So, the phrase also carries the implication of an inheritance deprived.

The princess argues back on the same terms: "Leve sir, lat be that thought; / The child was geten bitwen ous to. / For thi bileve it farth so." (Leave, sir, let be that thought; / The child was begotten between us two. / For thy belief it fares so, 600-602). "[T]hat thought" may suggest adultery, a common topos in medieval romance and one often associated with monstrous births, hence the princess's insistence that they conceived the child together.[81] Her initial "Leve" picks up on his "false bileve," though it has many possible senses here. She could be asking him to believe her, or asking for leave to speak, or telling him to "leave off" that thought, or using it as an interjection, as in "Faith, sir." The word gets at the fraught relationship between the princess's lower position as a woman, for whom adultery is a dangerous accusation and who must show deference to her lord, and her superior moral position from the perspective of the Christian romance. Both spouses treat as a given the belief that the child's form is the result a kind of "bad faith," either through feigned belief or belief in the wrong god, with perhaps a nod to unfaithfulness as well. The romance emphasizes the unusual and fraught cross-*kynde* marriage leading up to the birth, implying that something about the match is the cause. The episode seems to provide a tangible rationale for the Muslim sultan's unwillingness to marry the princess until she converts, as well as for a Christian taboo against marrying outside the religion.

When the child receives the Christian sacrament of baptism, it miraculously receives human form: "Feirer child might non be bore — / It no hadde never a lime forlore, / Wele schapen it was, withalle" (No fairer child could be born—it lacked no limb, well-shaped it was,

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[80] MED s.v. līth n. (4)

[81] C.f. *Emaré*, Man of Law's Tale, *Chevelere Assigne*, etc.

altogether, 775-777). Upon baptism, the lump becomes both alive and recognizably human, showing that soul-making and humanity are the province of Christianity, in contrast to the Muslims, who are dehumanized by their continual comparison to dogs. Although disparity between spouses is the first problem, seemingly resulting in the monstrous birth, the test by which first the sultan and then the princess petition their respective gods to transform the lump also asserts the superiority of Christianity and anticipates the sultan's conversion. The child's body is also now determinate; its fairness and beauty reflect nobility and merit.

While the word "fair" often refers simply to physical beauty, it also means "light" or "bright" and suggests a light complexion.[82] It is no coincidence that the same word refers both to beauty and to light skin. Strongly associated with class, fair skin also has developing racial connotations in Middle English, as made clear by the contrast to the sultan's black skin. Upon his own baptism, the sultan undergoes his own miraculous transformation: "His hide that blac and lothely was / Al white bicom thurth Godes gras / And clere withouten blame" (His hide that was black and loathsome / became all white through God's grace / And clear without blame, 922-924). The sultan's previous blackness is associated with physical and moral ugliness, in opposition to the idea of "fairness," and his transformation relies upon the association of white skin with beauty, virtue, and Christianity.[83] Just as the sultan and the princess read the baby's formlessness as a sign of "false belief," the princess interprets the sultan's new white skin as an indication of his religion: "Than wist sche wele in hir thought / That on Mahoun leved he nought / For chaunged was his hewe" (Then she knew well in her thoughts / That he did not believe in

[82] MED s.v. fair

[83] This passage also seems a sort of inversion of the "black and beautiful" of the *Song of Songs* tradition. See Bruce Holsinger, "The Color of Salvation: Desire, Death, and the Second Crusade in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*," in *The Tongue of the Fathers: Gender and Ideology in Twelfth-Century Latin*, ed. David Townsend and Andrew Taylor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

Mohammad / Because his hue was changed, 922-924). Unlike *Gowther* and the Man of Law's Tale, this text creates space for its sultan to be converted and his *kynde* apparently transformed through baptism. The possibility of conversion opens a conceptual space between race and religion, even as the sultan's racial change denies that space, vividly proposing ambivalence about whether race and religion can be separated. In the process of exploring the relationship between race and religion, the text shows race incompletely constructed, both familiar and strange to the modern reader. For *King of Tars*, religion defines the body, reversing the modern racial logic in which the color of the body determines interior and moral qualities.

Just as religion determines the body, so does it shape heredity. When the princess presents her humanized baby to the sultan, the baby's fair form seems to throw the sultan's blackness into sharp relief: "Than cam the soudan that was blac, / And sche schewed him the child and spac / With liif and limes and face. (Then came the sultan that was black / And she showed him the child and spoke (or at once) / With life and limbs and face, 793-795). The beautiful, fair, Christian child is now an image of his mother. As a lump, the baby was a monstrous thing that did not show traits of either parent, as modern conceptions of racial mixing would lead modern readers to expect. Now a human child, the baby still does not show signs of admixture, but seems to resemble only his mother. When the sultan expresses joy at the baby's transformation, the princess corrects him:

> 'Ya, sir, bi Seyn Martin
> Yif the halvendel wer thin
> Wel glad might thou be.'
> 'O dame,' he seyd, 'how is that?

Is it nought min that Y bigat?'

'No, sir,' than seyd sche,

'Bot thou were cristned so it is —

Thou no hast no part theron ywis,

Noither of the child ne of me.' (802-810)

'Yea, sir, by Saint Martin

If the half-portion were yours

Well might you be glad.'

'Oh dame,' he said, 'how is that?

Is it not mine that I begot?'

'No, sir,' then said she,

'Unless you were christened so it is—

You certainly have no part therein,

Neither of the child nor of me.'

The monstrous birth topos often works to impugn the reputation of the mother, suggesting either that she is inhuman, as occurs in the Man of Law's Tale, or that she has had an exogamous and adulterous relationship, as in *Sir Gowther*. The topos begins that way in *King of Tars* as well, with the sultan blaming his wife who insists, "The child was geten bitwen ous to" before blaming her husband's false faith (601). Here, the romance turns the gendered implications of monstrous birth on their head, asserting that the baby is not the sultan's—but not in the usual sense of adultery and illegitimacy. Rather, the baby is not the sultan's until he converts: heredity, like

bodily form, depends on religion rather than vice-versa. In contrast to modern-era racial logic that claims that religion and morality follow from race, this romance reveals how race is being constructed from religion.

However, race as seen in *King of Tars* is constantly fluctuating. As Heng notes, "Critical race theory itself, of course, has for decades attentively scrutinized culturalist forms of racing...without assuming that racial distinctions must be grasped as permanent or stable for racial categorization to occur"; and indeed, the racing that occurs in *King of Tars* is far from stable, but can be named as race nonetheless. [84] Medieval romance can and does explore race well before modern pseudo-scientific definitions of race emerged, and their more cultural visions of race, heavily inflected by religion, tend to be fluid and at times perhaps self-contradictory. For this strange pre-modern facet of identity, romance with its enthusiasm for contradiction and transgression is the perfect arena. Cord Whitaker is correct when he observes of *King of Tars*, "While some critics have taken the conversion as the conflation of racial and religious identity, the change is in fact not indicative of a cut-and-dried relationship between Christian identity and the normativity of European whiteness." In spite of the slipperiness of racing, we can still name it, both in medieval texts and the modern world, and organize against it. *King of Tars* shows a kind of racial logic that is at once distant from the present day, sliding in and out of view as it interacts with religion, but also strikingly familiar. As Geraldine Heng argues, *Tars* shows the medieval state of race that predates and presages race in the modern era, a kind of Othering that closely follows religious Othering. But, even as medieval racing lays the groundwork for modern racism, it also reveals that race formation is not inevitable. The same romance has moments where racing weakens and boundaries between racial *kyndes* are the most permeable, after all, as

[84] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages,* 26.

well as moments of reactionary violence. In a flash of empathy for the sultan, the romance narrates,

> For nothing wold he neyghe that may
> Til that sche leved opon his lay,
> That was of Cristen kende.
> Wel lothe war a Cristen man
> To wedde an hethen woman
> That leved on fals lawe;
> Als loth was that soudan
> To wed a Cristen woman (403-410)

> For nothing would he lay with that maid
> Until she believed in his faith,
> That was of Christian kind.
> Very reluctant would a Christian man be
> To wed a heathen woman
> That believed in a false law;
> As reluctant was that sultan
> To wed a Christian woman.

This passage is particularly striking given the genre's tendency to omit discussions of motivation and other markers of interiority. Here, the romance not only delves into the sultan's interior, but

also equates him with a good Christian man. His loyalty to his faith seems almost a virtue here, even though his belief makes him a heathen from the perspective of the romance. Yet, despite this moment of empathy for the Other, the romance ends with a kind of gleeful violence that exterminates all who will not convert to Christianity. The variable ways *kynde* is treated in *Tars* and the other romances under consideration here reveal ambivalence about race, holding on the one hand a desire to imagine intermarriage and glimpses of empathy for the Other, and on the other anxiety about the trustworthiness of converts and a retreat to the comfort of familiar, theologically-approved bloodshed. While *Tars* and the other romances considered in this chapter provide an early example of racial logic and violent racist fantasy, they also betray the constructedness of race and equivocation about the permeability of racial categories. When race appears, it's in a shifting, unstable way that scholars like Bonnie Wheeler and Cord Whitaker have emphasized as not inexorable.[85]

In a romance obsessed with transformation, the sultan's conversion receives especially rich detail. A miracle prompts the conversion:

> The soudan seye wele bi sight
> That Jhesu was of more might
> Than was his fals lawe.
> He seyd, "Dame, anon right
> Ichil forsake mi god aplight —
> Thai schal be brent and drawe." (823-828)

[85] Bonnie Wheeler, "Origenary Fantasies: Abelard's Castration and Confession 1," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages,* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Routledge, 1994).

The sultan saw well by sight
That Jesus was of more might
Than was his false creed.
He said, “Dame, right away
I will forsake my pledged god—
They shall be burnt and drawn.”

Just as the sultan sees with his own eyes the proof of the power of Christian belief, in the Man of Law’s Tale, a miracle pertaining to eyes occurs to motivate Alla’s conversion. Custance’s slanderer swears falsely on a gospel book and then:

An hand him smoot upon the nekke-boon,
That doun he fel atones as a stoon,
And bothe his eyen broste out of his face,
In sight of everybody in that place. (669-72)

A hand smote him upon the neck-bone
So that down he fell at once like a stone,
And both his eyes burst out of his face,
In sight of everybody in that place.

Then a disembodied voice proclaims Custance’s innocence to the assembled witnesses. Sight receives special emphasis in both episodes as the motive for belief and conversion. Alla and his

court receive ocular proof of the existence and power of Custance's god, while her persecutor loses the sight of his eyes and falls senseless as a "stoon." This image for insensate flesh also describes the lump baby in *King of Tars*, who is as "ded as the ston" or "stille as ston" (581, 636). Of course, a miracle occurs in *Sir Gowther* as well, but relies on voice rather than sight. The princess's cured muteness does not punish a nonbeliever by taking away faculties, but extends abilities to a believer, symbolizing Gowther's rehabilitation as a Christian and his readmittance into the community. Amid the abstraction of thinking through sacramental logic, sensory conviction appears to help determine *kynde* as well. A dramatic shift in what is perceived confirms a change in *kynde*, demonstrating the centrality of form and materiality in understanding *kynde* and suggesting that *kynde* is not only something internal but is visible to the world as well.

Besides being demonstratively visual, the miracle that saves Chaucer's Custance is also a graphically violent one. Such violence also hangs over the conversion of the Sultan of Damas in his promise that his old idols will be "brent and drawe," a symbolic execution that might seem at odds with the "charité" he asks of his wife in the very next line. The sultan also fears that if their conversion is discovered, "Thou schalt be brent and Y todrawe / And we forsoke our fay." (You will be burned and I drawn / Because we forsook our faith, 881-882). Violence seems a necessary corollary of conversion, where one religion must wholly destroy the other. If form and the sensory are central to *kynde*, then so is violence. That connection, however, is in flux: for theologians, violence can lead to a change in *kynde,* so that coerced baptism is salvific, while for *Tars*, violence seems to come about as a result of conversion instead.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of *kynde* as purely external. The internal state of a baptizand, steamrolled by the theological embrace of coercion, appears to still be crucial to the

romance. The romance's insistence on educating the Sultan of Damas in his new faith reveals an underlying concern with baptizing pagans. Immediately after stating his intention to convert, the sultan pauses to ask for instruction:

> Ac telle me now par charité,
> And for the love thou has to me,
> What schal Y seyn in sawe?
> Now ichave forsaken mi lay.
> Tel me now what is your fay,
> And ichil lere wel fawe. (829-834)

> But tell me now by charity,
> And for the love you have for me,
> What shall I say in creed?
> Now I have forsaken my law.
> Tell me now what is your faith,
> And I will learn very eagerly.

This moment in a frequently violent romance is poignant, with the sultan calling on his wife's love as he abandons his beliefs and customs. In response, the learned princess launches into a lengthy creed that takes up a full three stanzas. Yet, the sultan asks again: "Preye now the prest, he com ous tille / And teche me Cristen lay." (Ask now that the priest come to us / And teach me

Christian law, 875-876). The emphasis on the sultan's education continues with the priest's response:

> Sir, icham redi here
> With alle the pouwer that Y can
> For to make thee Cristen man
> And Godes lay to lere. (885-888)

> Sir, I am ready here
> With all the power that I can
> To make you a Christian man
> And God's law to teach.

Is the faith of converts genuine? Or are they accepting baptism for worldly reasons, like the unreliable converts of the Baltic Crusades? Even after the sultan's gods fail to perform when called upon to transform the lump baby, and when Custance's god performs a miracle, still all of this instruction is needed. Theologically, it is worse for a pagan to be baptized and then revert to pagan practices than to never receive baptism in the first place. The sultan's education ensures that he knows his new duties as a Christian and places beyond a doubt the sincerity of his faith prior to his baptism. The romance, in this regard, is infinitely more punctilious than historical missionaries, particularly in crusading contexts. The romance, and the others in this chapter as well, approaches conversion with far more caution even than theologians, who initially resisted the use of force to bring souls to the font but gradually condoned it. These romances react against

the willingness first of missionaries and then of theologians to countenance forced conversions by questioning whether any conversion of a pagan is possible and seeking out the narrow conditions—witnessing of miracles, Christian heritage, education in the faith—that would legitimize it.

For these romances, a conversion of racio-religious identity is not impossible, but neither is it as simple as receiving a baptism. Despite the marvelous efficacy of the baptism in *King of Tars,* these romances as a group show some reservations about baptism as a means of changing this identity. Within and across the romances, iterations of topoi accrue, creating not only iteration but also, crucially, variation. The topoi I've explored here, which are commonly linked, include the sultan's marriage threat, the monstrous birth, and the sacraments of baptism, penance, and marriage. Thus, in variation from *Tars,* Gowther's baptism as a child has not fully integrated him and requires penance to fully form his *kynde*. The specter of false baptism haunts The Man of Law's Tale in the sultaness's bloody imagination, though miracles and some greater racial affinity help Custance to baptize the people of Northumberland. Racial differences present a partial problem for baptism, asking the audience to worry about whether baptism will "work" to bring a racialized subject into Christian *kynde*, so the sultan's marriage threat threatens not only war, but also a confusion of the boundaries of religious identity. The topos of monstrous birth shows one potential consequence for bridging group belonging in this way and itself threatens to upend natural, proper succession and legitimacy. Thus, race, religion, gender, and class, all part of *kynde*, are made distinct, visible in the variation of topos within and across romance, yet also conditioned by one another.

These romances posit the credibility of a complete conversion of racial and religious identity, a scenario fully realized in the narrative events of *King of Tars* but also gestured toward

in the possibilities raised in The Man of Law's Tale and even *Gowther*. Yet, at the same time, color and religion both merge and divide at different times in these romances as they raise questions about what baptism does and what it does not or cannot do. For all of the importance of sacraments to these narratives, however, the questions raised about baptism are ultimately here questions about *kynde,* asking what a person's essential nature is, how it can be known, how changed, and how various facets of that nature can bear on one another. In my next chapter, I will take up this nexus of qualities with a focus on class and gender through the lens of a different set of topoi: the fair unknown and related topoi of recognition, knowing, and unknowing. However, it bears stressing that, though I must move to a new chapter, these interacting features of *kynde* extend across topoi, across texts, and even across languages.

Chapter Two

Class, Gender and the Fair Unknown in *Le Roman de Silence*

I. "Ma Grant Honor": Introduction

In the topos I alluded to in the introduction of this project an infant of noble birth is brought up with a concealed identity, often in the seclusion of the forest. In spite of a humble upbringing, something is special about the youngster, and in time the true nobility of the fair unknown shines through and they step into their birthright. What at first blush seems to be a rags-to-riches tale of social mobility in fact turns out to be a narrative of social classes inevitably returning to their rightful places, like oil and water stratifying after being mixed together. The thirteenth-century *Le Roman de Silence* takes on this topos with a twist, concealing gender instead of class. In the process, the romance flirts with the comic genre of the fabliau and reveals the materiality underpinning class. In this chapter I will take up the nature of class *kynde* by showing how *Silence*'s unique deployment of the fair unknown topos reveals the exchangeability of honor, money, gender, and sexuality.

Le Roman de Silence is a thirteenth century romance about a young noble named Silence, born when women have been disinherited and so raised as a boy. Amidst conflict between Nature and Nurture, Silence grows up into an exceptional young nobleman, and, after a brief stint as a minstrel, arrives at court where he is subjected to the unwanted advances of the queen. Silence is sent away twice and finally told he must search the woods for Merlin in order to return, according to legend a task only achievable by a woman. Merlin reveals the characters' secrets and Silence's sex, whereupon Silence is reassigned to a female role and married to King Ebain.

Though it is most famous for playing with gender and sex, the *Roman de Silence* also muddies class characteristics, both proposing and questioning the proposition that class status corresponds with inborn and immutable moral qualities. [86] Relatively few critics have taken up the class dimensions of *Silence,* and these have almost universally ruled the romance to be conservative, acting to naturalize class and promote royal prerogatives.[87] This assumption of conservatism is hardly surprising; as Helen Cooper observes, "Romance is the myth of the ideology of primogeniture," a topic that *Silence* takes up with particular urgency.[88] However, though the romance features the characteristic effort to tie things up neatly at the end, I argue that the failures of the ending artfully undercut this seeming conservatism to instead leave unresolved the radical fungibility of classed and gendered *kyndes* raised in the romance. As Ryder and Zaerre note, "The ending of *Le Roman de Silence* is almost universally unsatisfying for modern readers,"[89] though I argue that the ending fails not just for modern audiences; at the end, in Kinoshita's words, "the union of an old man to a young wife suggests instead a typical fabliau

[86] Criticism has considered the romance as a feminist narrative (see, for example, Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable': Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in *Le Roman de Silence,*" *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1997): pp. 7-34); as an anti-feminist text (Simon Gaunt, "Straight Minds/"Queer" Wishes in Old French Hagiography" *GLQ* 1, no. 4 (1995): 439-457); as a narrative of crossdressing (Emma Campbell, "Translating Gender in Thirteenth-Century French Cross-Dressing Narratives: *La Vie de Sainte Euphrosine* and *Le Roman de Silence*," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 49, no. 2 (1 May 2019): 233-264); as a lesbian text (Kathleen M. Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire in the Old French *Roman de Silence,*" *Arthuriana* Summer 7, no. 2 (1997): pp. 47-62); as a trans narrative (Karen A Lurkhur, "Medieval Silence and Modern Transsexuality," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 11, no. 4 (1 October 2010): 220-338); and as a nonbinary text (Elizabeth A. Waters, "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* Summer 7, no. 2 (1997): pp. 35–46).

[87] See Roberta L. A. Clark, "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2002): pp. 50-63; Sharon Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides: Marriage, Patriarchy, and Monarchy in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2002): pp. 64-75; Sharon Kinoshita, "Heldris de Cornuällis's *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage," *PMLA* 110, no. 3 (May 1995): pp. 397-409.

[88] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time,* 362.

[89] Mary Ellen Ryder and Linda Marie Zaerre, "A Stylistic Analysis of *Le Roman de Silence*" *Arthuriana* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2008): pp. 22-40, 22.

plot — a generic coding enhanced by the fact that MS Mi. LM. 6 also contains ten fabliaux."[90] Besides the age difference, the king is also Silence's great-uncle; he frequently refers to Cador, Silence's father, as "niés" or "neveu" (nephew).[91] Scholarship has embraced the idea that the seemingly conservative ending does not undercut the messy gender problems raised by the body of the text; as Waters writes, "feminist critics have argued convincingly that this prolonged meditation on possibilities of radically other conceptions of gender itself queries the text's misogynist tirades and simplistic ending."[92] By the same token, I argue, the romance's portrayal of class trouble troubles the audience, and the ending that fails to contain issues of gender likewise insists on leaving open questions of class.

Although the romance is in French and therefore does not explicitly invoke the Middle English word *kynde*, it does have considerable connections to England, where the sole surviving manuscript was found; the setting of the romance; and the place, Cornwall more specifically, the poet claims to be from. Though the poem is interested in many of the ideas that underly *kynde,* French does not have an exact translation for the word. *Silence* keeps coming back to a cluster of words to get at the problems of identity, belonging, essence, and nature at the heart of the romance. *Nature* and *nourriture* frequently recur, often as capitalized personifications of those ideas, as do *us* and *a* or *avoir*, as in the pun in Silence's name:

Il iert només Scilenscius;

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[90] Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides," 72.

[91] *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance* trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State UP, 1992), e.g., *ll.* 532, 609, 690, 691, 708. All future citations will be in text. All translations for this text are Roche-Mahdi's.

[92] Waters, "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*," 36.

Et s'il avient par aventure

Al descovrir de sa nature

Nos muerons cest -us en -a,

S'avra a non Scilencia.

Se nos li tolons dont cest -us

Nos li donrons natural us,

Car cis -us est contra nature,

Mail l'altres seroit par nature.

He will be called Silentius.

And if by any chance

his real nature is discovered,

we shall change this -us to -a,

and she'll be called Silentia.

If we deprive her of this -us,

we'll be observing natural usage,

for this -us is contrary to nature,

but the other would be natural. (2074-2082)

Nature gets fairly close to *kynde*; as Roberta Krueger writes,

> the central narrative investigation of the poem: the question of "nature de feme." ...As Heldris sets up the opposition, it is ostensibly a conflict between biological destiny, or

> what the editor translates as Heredity ("Nature''), and culturally imposed social roles or Environment (“Noreture''). “Nature,” however, turns out to have multiple meanings, ranging from biological sex (the female “nature” that Silence hides), to moral temperament (one’s personal "nature”), to class-bound character (what we might translate as the good breeding that accompanies noble birth), to the status quo of gender roles (the “natural” domain of women, as determined by social conventions and political order). [93]

However, the text also uses another, less tidy term that implicates both Silence's gender troubles and class: *honor*. The virtue of honor is at stake in the romance, but so is the idea of honor as a position or status. When Silence turns twelve Nature and Nurture arrive to debate over the fate of the youth in an extended sequence rife with punning on *a*, *us*, and *nature*. The episode ends, however, with a turn to *honor*. Nurture sends her opponent away: "Nature, envoies o *t*a honte," (Nature, begone in disgrace!) and Reason arrives to caution, "Ne cuidiés pas li rois vos mete / En l'onor, por estre parjure, / Sil aperçoit vostre nature" (Do not think the king will go back on his word / and acknowledge you as rightful heir, / when he finds out your true nature, 2604, 2622-2624). This latter passage could perhaps also be translated, "Do not think the king will honor you for your dishonesty if he discovers your nature"; the translation depends on whether the causal clause "por estre parjure" is attributed to Silence or the king and is enabled by the ambiguity of the idea of *honor*, playing on what Emma Campbell calls the "double meaning of *honor* in Old French, which could mean 'honor/dignity' or 'fief/feudal property'."[94] Silence further muses,

[93] Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1993), 117.

[94] Campbell, "Translating Gender in Thirteenth-Century French Cross-Dressing Narratives," 250.

Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.

Nel sui, par foi, ains sui honis

Quant as femes voel estre onis.

Gel pensai por moi aäsier.

Trop dure boche ai por baisier,

Et trop rois bras por acoler.

On me poroit tost afoler

Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,

Car vallés sui et nient mescine.

Ne voel perdre ma grant honor,

Ne la voel cangier a menor.

Now I am honored and valiant.

No I'm not, upon my word – I'm a disgrace

if I want to be one of the women.

I was trying to make life easy for myself,

but I have a mouth too hard for kisses,

and arms too rough for embraces.

One could easily make a fool of me

in any game played under the covers,

for I'm a young man, not a girl.

I don't want to lose my high position;

I don't want to exchange it for a lesser. (2642-2652)

Here, *honor* seems to capture gender status (or gender *kynde*) rather than the virtue honor or a class prerogative, and in a particularly hierarchal way. *Honor* and *Nature* can both extend to indicate either class or gender, though *nature* lends itself, particularly in this narrative, to Silence's bodily, sexed experience, while *honor,* like English *nobilesse*, typically refers to (and indicates the close relationship between) class status and classed virtue. And compared to *nobilesse*, it seems that *honor* is strikingly vulnerable to being lost or taken away. This episode has been cited frequently, primarily for its rich commentary on gender and sexuality.[95] But amid the rapid-fire wordplay on clothing and nudity and language of the body, the idea of *honor* also recurs. *Honor* is what Silence lacks if he desires to be a girl, but also the rightful inheritance of the would-be girl Silentia. Like *kynde, honor* and its companion *nature* express Silence's identity, essentialized but also strikingly unstable. In *Le Roman de Silence*, much of that instability comes in the guise of fungibility, the potential to buy, sell, and exchange honor, class, money, gender, sex, and sexuality.

Where the texts I discussed in chapter one concern themselves with the conversion of identity, Silence treats such conversions as economic in nature. One of the topoi most concerned with class and particularly primogeniture drives this romance: the fair unknown. The topos of a fair unknown involves a young noble whose identity, particularly in terms of class, is concealed, though classed skills like beauty, manners, virtue, and horsemanship suggest the protagonist's true identity. Thus, the topos draws on the assumption that class is not merely an arbitrary economic arrangement but reflects inborn differences between people. Often, the fair unknown

[95] For example, see Robert L.A. Clark, "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class," *Arthuriana* 12, no. 2 (2002) 54-56; and Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1993), 117-120.

concept coincides with the foundling, a topos in which a child is raised by foster parents in ignorance of his or her parentage. These two topoi collide to strengthen the claim that class reflects inborn qualities when the fair unknown acts out his or her "true" class *kynde* unknowingly. However, the fair unknown topos can also occur on its own; Helen Cooper finds numerous variations:

> A fair unknown will, however, not necessarily be a foundling, though the children of both categories demonstrate their high lineage by beauty, courtesy, and exceptional prowess. The fair unknown who has not been abandoned may have been brought up by his mother in ignorance of his father, as Perceval is, or not knowing that the queen at whose court he lives is his mother, like Generides. He may be fostered, as Arthur is by Sir Ector, without his parentage being revealed either to himself or his guardian; or adopted, as Lancelot is by the Lady of the Lake, who knows his parentage but for long chooses not to tell him. He may opt to hide his origins after dispossession, as the young Horn does in his exile after his father has been killed. In the later years of romance when the characters are allowed to imitate their own generic memes, he may pretend anonymity in order to win a chivalric reputation independently of his blood line, as Malory's Gareth does.[96]

The fair unknown is perhaps one of the most familiar topoi of the genre, going right back to Chrétien's Perceval and Enide, though the topos is also famously associated with Gawain's son Guinglain, as in the 12th century *Le Bel Inconnu* from which the topos derives its name. The topos also appears in earlier Celtic texts, such as the ninth- or tenth-century Irish tale *Aided*

[96] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time,* 332.

Óenfhir Aífe, where Cú Chulainn's son Connla is unknown, or Pryderi, Rhiannon's son in the Welsh *Mabinogi*. Because of its longstanding and frequent use, the fair unknown is so well-established by the time of the thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence* that it allows for a great deal of variation and play. *Silence* repeatedly nods to the topos of the fair unknown while adding its own variations on the theme.

Besides being a topos of class, the fair unknown also takes up another of the romance genre's most abiding interests: the unknown itself, with its attendant concerns of concealment and revelation, cognition and recognition. Romance loves a good disguise and a good reveal. Though often the audience is let in on the secret of the disguise all along, romances draw out the tension to be found in the dramatic irony of a character's successful concealment. Unlike a modern detective novel, in which the identity of the killer is withheld from the audience, a medieval romance typically lets the audience in on its protagonist's true identity, and the pleasure is found not in suspense about what will happen at the end, but in *how* the inevitable recognition scene will occur, when it will happen, and what impact it will have for the audience. For all of their obsession with disguise, mistaken identity, forged letters, false accusations, and other topoi of unknowing, romances usually conceal very little from their audiences. Nonetheless, romances also make great dramatic use of their endings, playing up the resolution of previous unknowing with recognition scenes, tokens of recognition, reunions of separated families, and a tidy reinstatement of order. The inevitable recognition scene does not come as a surprise, but the preceding drama of the romance asks, will it work? Can the romance put all of this turmoil back into order at the end? Will the ending contain the problems raised by the romance and convince us of its rightness? Or will it fail? I argue that *Silence* shares the tactic of other messy romances like *Undo Your Door / The Squire of Low Degree* in refusing to contain the problems it raises,

instead leaving the audience with an unsettled sense that distinctions among class, money, gender, sexuality, and even genre are subject to transgression and exchange.

Silence deploys the topos of the fair unknown to insist that when we think about class, we also think about the effects of money—and about how both depend on gender and sexuality. Though modern readers may imagine that class and money are inevitably, transparently connected, they are not natural companions in medieval romance. The topos is exploited by the logic of *Silence* to reveal money's force in making fungible honor, nobility, gender, and sexuality. It structures the meaning and nature of class and, like the question of conversion discussed in the previous chapter, experiments with the possibilities of crossing *kynde* boundaries. The social mobility that is both posited and frustrated by the topos of the fair unknown is a key part of how the medieval imagination narrates and defends the *kynde* that class constitutes, but after reading *Silence* one is less able to forget how large a role sheer monetary transaction plays in that mobility. Money threatens the attribution of inherent nobility and honor to the elites and unsettles the cultural reproduction of those virtues and elites through gender roles.

II. "Error" and "Aventure": Silence's Birth

Much of the drama of Silence's concealed identity comes from Cador, Silence's father. Ahead of Silence's birth, Cador urges his wife Eufemie to have her lady report that the child has been born a boy, regardless of the baby's genitalia. When the lady reports just that, Cador does not know the true sex of his baby—just as planned.

Si e nest en moult grant error,

Car il n’en set pas la verror.
O l’error se melle esperance,
Et o l’espoir se melle errance.

He was in a state of tremendous uncertainty,
for he didn’t know the truth.
With uncertainty, hope was mingled,
and with hope, uncertainty. (1983-1986)

This moment draws out the state of dramatic irony in which the romance reader knows the sex of the baby, but the father, Cador, does not—and he knows that he doesn’t know, unlike the rest of the court. This dramatic irony is at the heart of the fair unknown topos; the romance audience invariably knows the true identity of the upstart character, and even knows that their true identity will be inevitably revealed at last, while some or all of the characters in the romance don’t know. The poet plays with the word “error,” which can have the sense of an inaccuracy, as is captured in Roche-Mahidi’s translation of “uncertainty,” but it can also carry the sense of wandering. The DMF gives the first definition as “Action d'aller à l'aventure, errance,” and indeed, earlier Cador uses the word “aventure” in describing his plan:

Car se nos avons une fille
N’avra al montant d’une tille
De quanque nos sos ciel avons,
se nos l’afaire ne menons

Si cointement par couverture

Que on n'en sace l'aventure.

For if we have a daughter,

she won't get a single shred

of our earthly possessions,

unless we arrange things so

cleverly and secretly

that nobody finds out what we're up to. (1750-1754)

"Aventure" is rhymed with "couverture" as Silence's identity and body are literally covered up in what amounts to an "aventure," from the Latin *advenire,* the neuter future participle of *advenire,* "to happen," but by this time a highly genre-coded word in romance that can often be translated as "marvel" or "wonder." The language of *aventure* signals the topos in the event that is the concealing of Silence's sex, putting it on par with marvels in other romances.[97]

In the passage about Cador's "error," the poet then permutates "error" into "errance," a word even more strongly connoting travel and aventure, to rhyme with "esperance." The latter is a word commonly associated with another generator of dramatic irony: the topos of the doubting

[97] An announcement of the aventure to follow often comes in the beginning of a romance. For example, see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: "*Forthy an *aunter* in erde I attle to schewe, / That a selly in sight summe hit holden / And an outtrage *aventure* of Arthures wonderes" (27-29); *Sir Degare*: "Knightes that were sometyme in londe / Ferli fele wolde fonde / And sechen *aventures* bi night and dai, / Hou thai might here strengthe asai; / So dede a knight , Sir Degare: / Ich wille you telle wat man was he." (3-8) and *Romans of Partenay*: "Who wyl know and enquire in what maner wys, / By se and land mervelous *aventures* / Which came unto sondry creatures, / For to cone it is an excellent thing, / And cause of many mannys preferring." (100-105) *The Works of the Gawain poet: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* ed. Ad Putter and Myra Stokes (London: Penguin Classics 2014); "Sir Degaré," from *The Middle English Breton Lays,* ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series: 1995); *The Romans of Partenay, or of Lusignen*, ed. Walter W. Skeats (London: 1866).

lover, whose beloved returns their affections but who is in a lovesick agony of ignorance. Esperance, which can be translated as “hope,” is a sort of positive face of unknowing, and is used several times in *Silence* when the protagonist's parents suffer in lovesickness for one another:

> Li baisiers formet les avance,
> Si les met plus en *esperance.*
> Si ont tolt mis en bel deport,
> D’*esperance* on fait contrefort…
>
> The kissing has furthered their cause considerably;
> it gives them greater *hope.*
> They have given themselves over to delight;
> they have fortified themselves with *hope.* (1135-1138. Emphasis mine.)

The repetition connects the fair unknown topos to other topoi of unknowing, swirling together hope, doubt, ignorance, uncertainty. Cador and Eufemie’s moment of "esperance" is quickly followed by a moment offering a verbal echo of Cador’s “error” over the sex of his child:

> Il n’ont mais entr’als nule error;
> Ainz sevent ore la verror,
> Qu’il es tamis et ele amie.
>
> There is no longer any misunderstanding between them;

from now on they know the truth,

that they are friends and lovers. (1155-1157)

Here, as in the passage following Silence's birth, "error" rhymes with "verror" and "esperance" is in relatively close proximity. The language draws a straight line between the lovesickness topos and the fair unknown, each characterized by the play of knowing and unknowing. The resolution of the lovesickness leads the problems of doubt, hope, and truth to pop up again in the next generation and suggests the next romance aventure.

The moment of Silence's birth and Cador's "error" also plays with what it means to be a fair unknown. What element of identity is concealed? Traditionally, the fair unknown's class is hidden, which often involves concealing their true parentage and name.[98] Here the baby's class is known and, in fact, assured by concealing its sex. In the case of a conventional foundling fair unknown, the foster parents would, like Cador, know that they don't know something about the identity of their child, while to the world there is no mystery in the baby's identity. *Silence* pushes the topos in a different direction, asking what counts as a fair unknown and what relationship a fair unknown has to social class.

III. "Ceste Est Sa Fille, Il Est Ses Pere": Inheritance Problems

In a romance best known for its manipulations of gender and sex, many lines are dedicated to unspooling the problems of inheritance innately tied up with marriage and gender, often in fairly granular detail. Silence's gender troubles, after all, arise from a prehistory of

[98] But not always; see Sir Percival in Chrétien. His mother raises him in the woods in ignorance of the entire concept of knighthood, allowing him to keep his familial connection to her and lose his class connection at the same time. However, there is still play with loss of identity; his mother addresses him only as "biax fix," "dear son," in place of a name.

inheritance problems. Inheritance is ultimately at the heart of the fair unknown topos; the romance genre rises up around the same time as the system of primogeniture, and similarly insists that there must always be one "true" heir, revealed inevitably through the workings of nature, magic, or providence.[99] The topos of the fair unknown is the staunchest articulation of this insistence, plunging the line of inheritance into doubt and confusion then showing the true heir inevitably coming to light, thereby naturalizing and rendering inevitable the system of inheritance. Along the way, the fair unknown shows himself (for he is most often a young man) to be, indeed, naturally or perhaps preternaturally better than his social inferiors and suited to his rightful class role, reinforcing the class system as a whole. In the *Roman de Silence*, however, problems with class as a whole and inheritance more narrowly begin right from the start.

Silence opens with an extended censure of greed and miserly romance audiences, a complaint that is somewhat conventional but which interacts with the fair unknown romance in productive ways:

> Volés esprover gent avere?
> Servés le bien, come vo pere:
> Dont serés vus li bien venus,
> Bons menestreus bien recheüs.
> Mais, puis qu'il venra al rover,
> Savés que i porés trover?
> Bien laide chiere et une enfrume,
> Car c'end est tols jors la costume.

[99] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time,* 326.

Do you want to see how stingy people are?
Serve them well, as if they were your father:
then you will be most welcome,
judged a fine minstrel, well-received.
But when the time comes to ask for something,
do you know what you will find?
Very bad cheer and a sour face,
that's what you'll always get from them. (23-30)

This haranguing of the audience is a fairly truculent way to start the romance, and it also undercuts the premise of the fair unknown topos, which claims that superior virtue, beauty, and skill are inborn qualities of the upper class. Contrariwise, the speaker, who calls himself Heldris of Cornwall, claims that there is a breakdown in the class system in which nobles are expected to repay service with lavish generosity. Heldris calls out the nobles in particular:

Tant par est cis siecles diviers
Qu'ançois poroit rime trover
Qui peüst en cest mont trover
Blos solement un sol pinchier
U il peüs sol tant pinchier
Dont il eüst salve sa paine,
Ne le traval d'une sesmaine.

but things are so bad in this times
that it’s a lot easier to write poetry
than to find in this world
one single solitary prince
from whom he might pinch
even so little that he might have saved himself the trouble—
not a week’s wages. (17-22)

Even before the events of the narrative begin, the text is already destabilizing the constraints of class representation. The text makes a perfect rhyme of "pinchier," equating the concept of a prince with one who pinches money—in the same breath as announcing that finding such rhymes are easy. There is also the implicit suggesting that those who ought to have the money are the minstrels, not the nobility who hoard their wealth and withhold proper pay. In his prologue, Heldris actually inverts the premise of the fair unknown, so that generosity is completely absent from the nobility; in effect, he accuses nobles of universally robbing the minstrels.

Indicted, too, are the upper-class virtues that are synonymous with romance, throwing the whole enterprise into question:

Honor lor est si esloignie
Que il n’en on une puignie. / [sic]
Doner, joster et tornoier,
Mances porter et dosnoier

Ont torné en fiens entasser;
Car qui violt avoir amasser,
Quant il n'en ist honors ne biens?

Honor is so scarce with them
that they haven't a fistful of it.
Generosity, jousting and tourneying,
wearing ladies' sleeves and making love
have turned to heaping up mounds of dung.
What good does it do one to pile up wealth
if no good or honor issues from it? (41-47)

The poet plays with the relationship between the material and ethical possessions of the nobility, first putting literal space between them with *esloignie*, or distance.[100] At the same time, these two preserves of the upper classes are equated, so that intangible ideas like honor might be able to be grasped in the hand like coin or piled up like manure. This equivalence plays into the romance's tendency, here and elsewhere, to capitalize on the potential of *honor* to refer both to the intangible virtue of honor and the more material feudal properties belonging to the nobility. Honor and landed wealth become fungible, revealing the pecuniary underpinnings of class and undercutting the very premise that it is virtue, not wealth, separating the classes. Heldris points out that the very definition of the word *honor,* one of the key concepts underlying *kynde*, is non-functional, not reflecting reality, because these senses of the word which should logically follow

[100] *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français,* s.v. "éloigner (verbe)," (2020).

each other have been ripped apart. Ultimately, the virtues ascribed to the nobility become the *issue*, captured in the verb *issir*, of wealth, as captured by *amasser*. Thus the poet sets up a system of procreation and lineal succession, one that is already broken, before any characters are even introduced.

The early sections of the romance, prior to Silence's birth, continue to set up problems of class and money; in a brief episode, two barons marry two twin daughters and, unable to ascertain which twin is the eldest and thus the heir, they engage in trial by combat and both die. Subsequently, King Ebain declares,

> Quel duel por .ii. orphenes pucieles!
> Que mes barons en ai perdus
> J'en sui certes moult esperdus:
> Mais, par le foi que doi Sant Pere,
> Ja feme n'iert mais iretere
>
> What a loss on account of two orphaned girls!
> What a way to lose good men—
> I am certainly very upset about this.
> But by the faith I owe Saint Peter,
> no woman shall ever inherit again (310-314)

Though Roche-Mahdi renders *Sant Pere* as "Saint Peter," the phrase could equally be translated as "Holy Father," heightening the drama of this change to the inheritance system that is usually

rendered so natural and inevitable by the genre of romance. The Christian god as father sets the pattern for the earthly father, and faithfulness to the earthly father and the system of primogeniture become tied up with the true faith to the divine Father. The stakes of right inheritance couldn't be any higher. The trial by combat further suggests that God is the arbiter of the conflict, so the death of the barons suggests perhaps that both men were wrong, perhaps throwing into question the system of inheritance through the female line. The deaths also work against the usual outcome of the fair unknown and other topoi of inheritance in romance, in which the rightful heir naturally and inevitably surfaces. Here, something has gone terribly and radically wrong. King Ebain seems to interpret the outcome in this way, laying the blame on the two twins, who certainly can't remember their own births to confirm the order—and the text puts the claim of rightful inheritance in the mouths of the barons, not the girls: "Cho dist cascuns qu'il a l'ainsee" (Each one claimed to have the older, 281). Nonetheless, the daughters take the blame, and women bear the consequences. Heldris slyly undercuts this authoritative interpretation, noting that, in swearing to uphold the king's decree, "Alquant le font ireëment / Et li plusor moult liëmont, Qui n'en donroiënt une tille" (Some did it in anger, / but most did it quite gladly— / the ones who had nothing to lose, 321-323).

This royal solution anticipates the historical problem of Salic law. Beginning in 1316, some time after the 13th-century *Roman de Silence*, a long series of succession crises in France led to the creation of a *de facto* precedent for the French throne going only to men and eventually being passed through agnatic succession, meaning that inheritance would not pass through women but only through the male line. In the late 14th and 15th centuries, French jurists revived a law first recorded in the sixth century but clarified in the eighth under Charlemagne, one clause of which said:

> De terra uero Salica nulla portio hereditatis mulieri ueniat sed ad uirilem sexum tota terræ hereditas perueniat.
>
> Regarding Salic land, no portion of the inheritance in fact comes to the female, but all of the inheritance passes to the masculine (virile) sex.

This came to be known in the 15th century as the Salic Law and applied specifically to the French throne. Scholars are divided over whether the Salic Law was inspired by political events (allowing inheritance through female lines would have given the English monarchs and additionally the monarchs of Navarre a legitimate claim to the French throne) or whether it was explicitly motivated by sexism.[101] These historical events postdate *Silence* but show how the poet anticipated real problems in the inheritance system. Women were an indispensable part of inheritance: marriages worked to unite families and were essential for the creation of heirs. But what of the women themselves, outside of the men they married and the boys they gave birth to? What should their role be?

Rather than providing a tidy solution to the system of inheritance, disinheriting the women of the realm upends the marriage market and destabilizes gender. In the romance's next episode, King Ebain and his men are beset by a dragon, and the king desperately promises that to the dragon's slayer "Jo li donroie une conte: / Et feme li lairai coisir / En mon roiame par loisir" (I will give him a county / and I will let him have the choice / of any woman in the kingdom,

[101] Derek Whaley, "From *a* Salic Law to *the* Salic Law: The Creation and Re-Creation of the Royal Succession System of France," in *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, ed. Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H.S. Dean, Chris Jones, Zita Rohr, Russell Martin (London: Routledge 2019).

382-384). Yet, what does this incentive matter without inheritance? Indeed, no one speaks up until Cador, who happens to be in love with Eufemie, the only child of the count of Cornwall. Eufemie, of course, is exactly the sort of woman who has been most impacted by the change in inheritance law. At first, this episode may seem to illustrate a decoupling of desire from wealth, so that nobles can marry for love rather than advantage. However, Eufemie ends up receiving what would have been her inheritance, and then some. Through a subsequent series of accidents, the couple get together and the king decides

> Si lor donroie l'an .m. livres,
> Car j'en sroie donc delivres:
> Et la tiere de Conuälle
> Apriés la mort Renalt sans fall.
> Ceste est sa fille, il est ses pere,
> N'ont plus d'enfans, il ne la mere.
>
> to give them a thousand pounds a year,
> I would grant them this myself, and the territory of Cornwall
> upon the death of Renald, without fail.
> She is his daughter, he is her father;
> she is her parents' only child. (1295-1300)

Thus, the couple's happy marriage is predicated on a one-time loophole to the new inheritance law. The inheritance lines that flow through women seem in the logic of the romance to be

essential for starting out a marriage, although of course historically such wealth was a privilege most had to do without. In fact, though most wealth held by noble families was inherited patrilineally, female succession existed alongside primogeniture starting from the twelfth century. Unlike male inheritance, female inheritance patterns were flexible and discretionary, navigating the at times conflicting interests of family and politics, and potentially destabilizing patrilineal inheritance and male feudal power.[102] Yet, the romance reads the dissolution of female inheritance as destabilizing—posing threats to desire, to the family, to gender itself. Unlike female succession lines, which allowed the distribution of wealth among descendants, strict pantrilineality concentrated wealth and, particularly for this romance, power. As Sharon Kinoshita points out, King Ebain's generosity conveniently ensures that his nearest male relative, Cador, will inherit Cornwall, and his methods stage a conflict between the rights of the nobility and the power of the crown:

> Ebain's proposal comes at the expense of Count Renald's feudal prerogatives. In allowing Eufemie to choose her husband, the king usurps the father's familial authority; by promising to invest the couple with the county of Cornwall, Ebain in effect affirms that patrimonies are transmitted not through the laws of inheritance but by royal decree.[103]

Even though Cador is related to the king and thus part of the nobility, he is in a surprisingly precarious position, gaining or losing by the king's whim. What does this tell us about the

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[102] Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy, and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 4-6.

[103] Sharon Kinoshita, "Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* and the Feudal Politics of Lineage," *PMLA* 110, no. 3 (1995): pp. 397-409, 401.

supposedly exalted *kynde* of nobility? Though medieval romances conventionally naturalize class, this episode reveals the artificiality and arbitrariness of the supposedly "natural right" of inheritance. Though Silence will later find himself unable to truly transform himself into a minstrel, traversing classes, yet the king retains the power to alter Silence's class *kynde.* This system's underpinnings are political and conventional, not natural at all. However, if we consider Silence's gendered transformations, here as well these changes are imposed on him rather than voluntary: first by his parents and later by the king. Into this mess of destabilized and insecure class and gender is born Silence.

IV. "Com Se Cho Fust une Grosse Ouevre": Silence as Minstrel

The clearest nod to the conventions of the fair unknown in *Silence* is also a passage that has received little scholarly attention. Between the episodes of Silence's birth and travails at court, the young Silence darkens his face with herbs and runs off to join two minstrels who had visited his childhood home in the woods. In a hallmark of the topos, Silence also reveals what is in English called a *kynemerk,* a birthmark shaped like a cross on his right shoulder (3647-48). In English, this word puns on the prefix *kine*-, meaning "kingly," and *kin,* family, and may also suggest *kynde.* In her discussion of the fair unknown Helen Cooper references an identical mark in another romance:

> A 'lost' heir required some mark of identity, some equivalent to a DNA test to prove paternity. Havelok has a light shine from his mouth when he sleeps, and also a 'kynemerk,' a birthmark showing both his kinship and 'kunrik', royalty, in the form of a gold cross on his right shoulder. The shoulder was the location of badges of allegiance:

men who had taken a vow to go on crusade bore a cross on the shoulder of their cloak, and the angels of Richard II's Wilton Diptych wear white hart badges in the same position.[104]

In *Silence*'s most obvious appropriation of the conventions of the fair unknown, the romance also presents the class vision most conventionally associated with the topos. Gender concealment is effectively being supplemented by class concealment, but uniquely, these two disguises are also locked in conflict with one another. Silence's gender is concealed to protect the inheritance that is his class prerogative, but he then conceals his class because of anxieties about gender performance.

For the first time, Silence's class identity (and, by extension, specific individual identity) is concealed. Silence is driven to assume this disguise by the instability of his gender. The fair unknown topos inevitably leads to a recognition scene in which the rightful heir is revealed and his proper status and inheritance are restored to him. For Silence, however, this outlook is not so rosy. He worries:

S'il avenoit del roi Ebayn
Que il morust hui u demain,
Feme raroit son iretage.
Et tu iés ore si salvage,
Ne sai a us de feme entendre.
Alques t'esteveroit aprendre

[104] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time,* 324-325.

Dont te seüsces contenir,

Car told cho puet bien avenir.

If it should happen that King Ebain

died today or tomorrow,

women would inherit again,

and you are now so fierce

that you know nothing of women's arts.

You really need to learn something

that would serve you in good stead,

for all that might come to pass! (2831-2838)

Paradoxically, being re-inherited now has the potential to be a disaster for Silence because it could force him into a gender he has not been raised in and does not know how to perform. So, he will learn another kind of performance. As Silence's gender has been concealed to protect the inheritance that is his class prerogative, now he will conceal his class to shore up an unstable gender. Silence reasons, "Ta harpe et ta viële avras / En liu de cho que ne savras / Orfrois ne fresials manoier" (you will have your harp and vielle / to make up for the fact that you don't know / hoe [sic] to embroider a fringe or border, 866-2869). In this way these two kinds of disguise, taken together, open up the possibility of exchange between gender and class.

While the romance at large is rife with anxiety about the ignoble behavior of the nobility and cracks in the inheritance system, in the context of Silence's minstrel episode all works as it should. The fair unknown shows himself to be naturally superior to the lower class guise he takes

on, and Silence inevitably rises to the top. Because of the class stratification brought about by Silence's role as a fair unknown, he never truly transforms into a minstrel; the role remains a disguise only, and acts as a foil for the gender transformation at the center of the romance. When Silence runs away with two minstrels, Cador reacts by banning all minstrels from the land on pain of death. This episode echoes the twin daughter episode that resulted in women being disinherited:

> Oï avés, cho est la some,
> Que .m. gens muerent par .i. home:
> Et par .ii. d'als, quant sunt falli,
> Avient que .m. sunt malballi.
> Maisa vis m'est, que c'on en die,
> Que cit ne font a blasmer mie
> Quel qu'ait li cuens damage u honte;
> Car nel sevent pas fil a conte.
> Ne sevent niënt de la voire:
> Qu'il jurast, nel peüscent croire,
> Car il les siert si humlement.
>
> What you have heard all comes down to this:
> a thousand people were doomed on account of one man;
> because of two, whatever they might have done,
> it happened that a thousand were persecuted.

I don’t care what anyone says; in my opinion,
those minstrels were not at all to blame
for whatever loss the count had suffered,
because they didn’t know he was the count’s son.
They didn’t know a thing about it.
And even if he had sworn it was true, they wouldn’t have believed him,
because he served them so humbly. (3127-2127)

Again, a personal tragedy caused by ignorance leads to the scapegoating and legal censure of an entire *kynde* of people. Class and gender *kyndes* seem to work the same here: both can be held culpable and collectively punished for the actions of one or two. Both are subject to the loss of their legal rights and status at a moment's notice. The idea that people can be clearly categorized by their *kynde* is upheld by the collective judgements, but the rights and the stability that should inhere in *kynde* are lost.

The reason given for the minstrels’ ignorance of Silence's identity, moreover, stands out as a peculiar one. When they were guests at Silence’s home, he served them humbly in an enactment of the generous hospitality held up as an ideal of the nobility. Later, after he darkens his face, the minstrels recognize him by this action, though they confuse the status of the boy who served them at the noble estate:

Si m’aït Dex, si com j’espoir,
C’est chi nostre vallés d’ersoir.
Il est tols d’atretel servise,

Mais qu’il est trestols d’altre guise.

Et, par foit, c’est estrange cose:

Cil d’ersoir ot color de rose

Et cis ichi l’a si tré jausne,

Com s’il fust tains d’ortie u d’aisne.

So help me God (I hope he will),

that is our valet from last night.

He serves exactly the same way,

even though he looks completely different.

And indeed, it’s strange:

the one last night had a rosy complexion,

while this one is all yellowish,

as if he were stained with nettles or wine-dregs. (2948-2956)

In Silence’s disguise, a darkened face signifies a lower class. Yet, earlier, Silence’s complexion had already been darkened by his male gender role, when Nature complains, “Ki ira al vent et al halle, / Com se cho fust une grosse ouevre" (who will go out in the wind and scorching sun, / as if he were of crude workmanship, 2290-2291). The text associates masculinity with mean class, while also seeming to differentiate them, so that dark skin is a marker of masculinity and rude status, yet Silence can be both scorched and rosy as a nobleman, then stained and yellowed as a peasant boy. Gender and class don't map neatly onto one another for this romance, though they seem constantly to interact.

Beyond the color play, however, Silence's humble service seems to both announce and conceal his true class. Humility, paradoxically, is the province of the great who are able to choose to lower themselves, not the innately humble—though the peasant-born minstrels are unable to properly interpret the gesture. It can also be a gendered virtue, the sign of a truly noble woman. Silence's humility, besides simply marking his true class, also signals classed and gendered virtue, and stands in contrast to the villainy that inheres in the lower classes. Humble service, thus, acts as a highly visible component of Silence's fair unknown condition, along with a catalogue of typical upper-class virtues, as the topos works to both delimit and arrange hierarchically class *kyndes*:

> Por cho qu'ert bials, et si vallans, / [sic]
> Ert il a cort tols jors li sire.
> Porquant nel puet nus por voir dire,
> Por nule honor c'on li fesist,
> Que mains por cho s'entremesist
> De çals server et descalcier,
> Car ne se voloit essalcier.
> Il les siert moult et biel et bien,
> Mais ne li valt, voir, nule rien:
> Car por servir, ne por bien faire,
> N'iert ja vencus cuers de pute aire.
> Car li cuers cui francise adrece
> N'iert ja vencus fors part destrece.

Li bontés a l'enfant acroist,

Li vilonie a çals aöist.

Because he was handsome, gracious,

and such an accomplished musician,

he was the center of attention wherever he went.

And yet, no one could truthfully say,

despite all the honors he may have received,

that he waited on the minstrels with any less care,

serving them and taking their boots off.

He didn't want to give himself airs,

he served them well and efficiently—

but it certainly did him no good at all,

for fine service and good deeds

never won a foul heart,

while a noble heart

is won over by the mere sight of distress.

As the youth's goodness increased,

his masters' villainy grew. (3185-3200)

The very trait that conceals Silence's class identity from the minstrels confirms it to the romance's audience as part of the fair unknown topos. After all, how can a nobleman disguised as a minstrel "give himself airs," presuming to a status that is, in fact, his birthright? "Essalcier,"

the word here translated as “give himself airs” or, more literally, “elevate [himself]”[105] rhymes with “descalcier” in the previous line, a somewhat uncommon word literally meaning “to unshoe,”[106] creating a paired antithesis. The unshoeing calls to mind the image of Christ washing his Apostles' feet, charging Silence’s gesture with religious virtue. Silence's terrific success as a musician, paradoxically, leads to his failure in the social role of "minstrel," just as his humility speaks to his secretly lofty class status. The youth's goodness, both in terms of his virtue and his skill (he is "good at" everything) mark him apart and set the stage for his minstrel masters to turn on him and essentially spit him back out into his native class world. Ironically, part of the minstrels' rage is that they are the masters, being surpassed by their student: a disruption to a micro class hierarchy that is superseded by the greater class hierarchy they can't see. All of Silence's "goodness," in the English translation, "certainly did him no good at all." The original French line is rife with emphasis and negation: "Mais ne li valt, voir, nule rien." The word "voir," an alternate spelling of "vrai," makes an emphatic truth claim about the statement and also seems to call out to the audience to look and pay attention. "Valt," a form of "valoir," connotes value more than goodness. The sense is that Silence doesn't get what he deserves for his goodness, in a moment that contains a wink at the narrator's ongoing complaints about the poor treatment of minstrels. Here, however, Silence's mistreatment is as a minstrel at the hands of minstrels: within what is ostensibly his own *kynde*. If shared *kynde* can confer group guilt, it does not seem to inspire any sense of solidarity. Perhaps *kynde* means more to those outside of the group, as a marker of difference that allows an Othered group to be painted with one brush, than to those so categorized. Instead of what he deserves, what Silence gets is a rejection that rapidly returns him

[105] *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* s.v. “Exhausser (verbe)” (2020).

[106] *DMF*, s.v. “Dechausser (verbe)” (2020).

to his identity as Silence and his place in the world of the nobility. Typically in a fair unknown romance this return is the ultimate goal, reestablishing inheritance, familial bonds, and a world where all is right. Ironically, in Silence's case it returns him to a fraught personal identity and a gendered crisis he had fled from.

Silence's failure to effectively transform into a minstrel stands in contrast to his gendered transformations, seeming to suggest that, at least for this romance, it is easier to change genders than class. There may be a disaffinity between Silence and the minstrels on the grounds of class, although they share a gender; however, later in the romance the queen's antipathy towards Silence shows a member of his social class attacking him on gendered lines. Silence's conflict with the queen sets in motion the events that will lead to his exposure and, like the minstrel episode, represents a moment of real peril for Silence. The minstrels provide a counterpoint to the queen, and the outlawing of minstrels to the outlawing of female inheritance, a structural mirroring that helps to underline the ways that gender and class can be seen to function similarly, while, at the same time, Silence's gender and class disguises work at cross-purposes to one another.

V. "Miols Valt li Graindres del Menor": Money Metaphors

Silence's unconventional gendering, of course, is motivated by the disinheritance of women. Cador comes up with the plan to have the child declared a boy regardless of its genitalia, arguing,

> Car se nos avons une fille
> N'avra al montant d'une tille
> De quanque nos sos ciel avons,

Se nos l'afaire ne manons...

For if we have a daughter,
she won't get a single shred
of our earthly possessions
unless we arrange things so... (1751-1754)

Is Cador's decision a sensible one, driven by an unjust law? Or is he assaulting the natural order out of greed, a desire to keep wealth amassed? The prologue of the romance might seem to suggest the latter, but Silence's heroic, noble nature argues for the former, as when Silence performs like a conventional (male) fair unknown in battle: "II a le guerre al coi finee, / Les .iiii. contes pris, et mors / Moult de lor gent par son effors" (Through his efforts, he had put an end to the rebellion, / captured the four counts, and killed / many of the enemy, 5664-5666).

While these questions trouble the framing of the narrative, a debate about whether gender arises from Nature or Nurture takes the foreground. Yet, even in this debate, class seems to be implicated. In arguing that no one can long go against his nature, the narrator claims that a man bad by nature might do right due to nurture, but not for long:

Et quant il est fors de la crieme,
Cuidiés que sis cuers ne l'enprieme?
Oïl! car il li dist et conte
Que moils valent .m. mars a honte
C'un denier mains a grant honor

Miols valt li graindres del menor.

And when he is not governed by fear,
don't you think his heart will put its stamp on him?
Yes! for it will tell him
that a thousand ill-gotten marks
are worth more than a denier earned more honorably,
that more is worth more than less. (2307-2312)

Nature is like a mint that strikes out coins, leaving a stamp or imprint ("enprieme"). The heart stamped with wickedness recognizes only the value of coin, as though like is being drawn to like, and counts coins with mercantile efficiency. The metaphor continues:

Car li nature vils l'enerre
Et le cuers de la grosse terre
Ki dient sor lui la segnorie
Et sole la parmenterie...

For his vile nature has paid a deposit on him,
and his heart of coarse clay
holds sway over him
and soils his fine apparel. (2321-2324)

Here Nature takes on the language of ownership ("enerre") and lordship ("segnorie"), drawing out the coin metaphor to the more abstract language of class.

Clothing, too, signals class, while suggesting that virtuous behavior is a sort of class disguise. "Parmenterie," an uncommon word meaning "the work of a tailor,"[107] can also be broken into the parts "par" and "menterie," or "through mendacity," strengthening the association between clothing and deceitful performance. These clothes are also soiled ("sole"), as if the coarse clay ("grosse terre") that is the substance of the heart has literally gotten onto the exterior. These passages fall in a longer section ostensibly about Silence's gender, yet the focus on clothing, money matters, and superior or lesser quality shifts the focus to class. Even the description of nature as "nature vils" uses an adjective with strong class connotations: "bas, abject, méprisable,"[108] drawing on the tradition of *contemptus mundi*,[109] contempt for worldliness. The narrator here asserts that nature can only be worsened, not improved, by nurture:

> Et mains cuers de gentil nature
> Empire moult par noreture,
> Et a grant honte si [a]hert,
> Qu'a moult grant painne puis le pert.
>
> And many a heart of noble nature

[107] *DMF,* s.v. "Parementerie (subst. fém.)" (2020).

[108] *Trésor de la Langue Française* s.v. "Vil, vile (adj.)" (1994).

[109] Elizabeth Harper, private correspondence.

becomes much worse through nurture

and hardens itself to very shameful ways,

so that it has a hard time shedding them later. (2325-2328).

The narrator suggests a sort of one-way class mobility: downward only. If this assertion is taken to refer to gender, it is belied by Silence's two-way transformation, first to a boy at birth and later to a girl at the end of the romance. If the narrator is in fact referring to class, Silence would still seem to disprove the claim by temporarily living as a minstrel before resuming his name and title.

Nonetheless, the contradictions introduced by the romance's competing claims about nature and nurture ask the audience to consider: can gender change? Can class change? And are these changes one-way only? In its discussion of interiors and exteriors, the mint metaphor introduces another axis of transformation, besides the upward and downward class mobility implied by its hierarchical language. The passage asks questions about insides versus outsides: a heart of coarse clay, an interior state, soils the outer, lying finery. A mis-matched interior and exterior appears to be an unstable state, demanding one or the other change. But, even if we are to assume that insides and outsides must eventually come to match, which way does transformation move: inward or outward? Time also appears to be another confounding axis of transformation. Can we move forward, or will we always be pulled backwards to our origins?

Elsewhere, the romance develops its exploration of transformations by posing a different kind of monetary metaphor: the exchange. This motif is introduced in the queen's attempt to seduce Silence using language of exchange perhaps predictive of the Exchange of Gifts sequence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

Baisiés me, ne soiés hontels!

Por .i. baisier vos donrai .ii.

Et ne vos sanble bien estrange

Que vos avrés si riche cange?

Kiss me, don't be shy!

I'll give you two kisses for one.

Don't you think that's an amazing

rate of exchange? (3759-3762)

The scene plays with a number of romance topoi around courtly love. For one, the queen believes that she and Silence are secret lovers, a topos which includes such famous couples as Tristan and Iseult, Lancelot and Guinevere, and Guigemar and his lady.[110] Of course, the comedic irony in this twist on the topos comes from the fact that the Queen's advances are emphatically unrequited. The exchange also plays with the tendency of romance to cast sexual love in highly metaphorical and stylized terms, such as with comparisons to a hunt or a courtly game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[111] The choice to use a monetary exchange is ironically a less courtly pastime to use as a metaphor, a tension the queen herself calls out in response to Silence's reticence:

[110] See James Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000), 137-142.

[111] *Sir Gawain* itself draws heavily on commercial language; see R.A. Shoaf, *The Poem as Green Girdle:* Commercium *in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Gainesville, A University of Florida Book, 1984).

Dist li: "Est cho cierisscement?
Quant vus si chier vus savés rendre,
Bien devriés achater et vendre!
Ciertes, bien savés contrefaire
Felon vilain de put afair."

She said to him, "Are you trying to jack up the price?
If you are such an expert at selling yourself dear,
you should go into the business.
You certainly do a very good imitation
of a cheap, vulgar tradesman." (3884-3888)

The passage puns on the word *cher*, which can refer to a high price or act as a term of endearment.[112] The queen says that Silence knows well how to *contrefaire*, a word that most simply means "imitate" but also captures the sense of "counterfeit" as well as literally meaning to "un-do."[113] The "counterfeit" meaning helps draw out the money metaphor, suggesting another kind of uneven exchange. Not only is Silence "un-doing" by behaving falsely, in this formulation, but also by his inaction: he enrages the queen with his failure to "do" for her what she wants. By saying that he imitates a "*felon vilain de put afair,"* a cruel villein of dirty business, she in essence calls Silence a whore (in the most pejorative sense) while also distancing

[112] *DMF*, s.v. "Cher (adj.)" (2020).

[113] *DMF*, s.v. "Contrefaire (verbe)" (2020).

herself from the class that buys and sells, the merchant class. While *put* is an adjective meaning "dirty or base," the related *putain* is a noun meaning "prostitute" and loaded with pejorative connotations.[114] The queen attacks Silence using a highly gendered insult: if he cannot be a "man" and kiss her, then he is a woman in the very lowest sense, not a lover but a whore. She treats Silence as an inferior, her subject, even though we would think of them as being in the same class, a dynamic that perhaps draws on the well-established topos of love service, in which the lady beloved takes on the role of a feudal lord.[115] Here, however, Silence's lower status is not at all honorable as it would be in a love service relationship. The monetary language of sexuality that she herself proposed, then, is beneath the queen, and so is Silence. Exchange is another kind of transformation, literally turning one thing into another. But the queen renders it abject. Exchange is dirtied by its association with money, which the queen implies places it beneath courtly love, but she also attaches it to sexuality in a pejorative way with her language around prostitution. The queen's language suggests that, although she proposed the money metaphor in the first place, in fact money has no place in a love affair and debases sexuality into a kind of prostitution. This contention undercuts the very real ways in which wealth and sexuality are entangled, revealed in the romance with the disruptions to the marriage market caused by the disinheritance of women. Of course, the queen's disparagement of Silence (and subsequent accusation of attempted rape) comes from her anger and humiliation at being rejected, but her

[114] Marina Yaguello has written extensively about the connotations of the word "putain" and gendered language. She writes, "La femme ne peut jouer que l'un de ces deux rôles: La maman, c'est-à-dire la femme « honnête «, la femme au foyer, la bonne pondeuse, la bonne ménagère, ou la putain, l'objet de consommation, réel ou imaginaire" (Woman can only play one of these two roles: The mom, that is to say the "honest" woman, the homemaker, the mother hen, the good housewife, or the whore, the object of consumption, real or imaginary"). *Les Mots Et Les Femmes: Essai D'approche Socio-linguistique De La Condition féminine* (Paris: Payot, 1978), 151.

[115] See E. Jane Burns, "Refashioning Courtly Love: Lancelot as Ladies' Man or Lady/Man?" in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggie McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

choice of language still plays with questions of whether mercantile activity is compatible with courtly values and, perhaps, hints at the dangers involved in connecting class with sexuality.

The two-for-one exchange metaphor proposed by the queen resurfaces when Silence has been sent to the French court with a letter. The original letter from King Ebain recommends Silence to the French king and asks that he be treated honorably, but it is replaced by one counterfeited by the queen demanding his death. The French king has already given Silence a kiss of friendship, which he and his advisors feel precludes him from doing violence to Silence. This kiss, homosocial and highly public, stands in marked contrast to the illicit kisses pushed on Silence by the queen, but it prompts similar language of exchange. The Count of Clermont advises:

> Mais se le rois Ebayns se diolt
> Qu'il a por no roi despendu,
> Or pensons qu'il li ait rendu!
> C'est al miols que jo puis savoir
> Qu'avoir li rende por avoir,
> Anchois tols jors por .i. marc deus
> Qu'il devigne por lui honteuls, /
> C'est miols que il s'abandonast,
> Et por avoir s'anor donast.
>
> But if King Ebain complains
> that he has spent large sums on our king's behalf,

let us see him reimbursed.

That's the best solution I can suggest:

that our king give back the money,

and at the rate of two marks for every one.

Rather than be dishonored for King Ebain's sake,

it's better for our lord to spend freely

and pay the money to retain his honor. (4656-4664)

Here the exchange proposed is more literal, money for money, and the issue at stake is not sexuality but honor. Clermont suggests that in a convoluted way honor can literally be bought, a paradoxical proposal on its face. Moreover, the means of "buying" honor, is, in this case, the severing of a feudal relationship, threatening the noble class on which the concept of "honor" is so dependent. It's also another potential blow to the class system in the vein of the disinheritance of women, and again the situation is tied up with gender and sexuality, because at its root is the queen's rage at being rejected and her accusation that Silence has raped her. Here, however, the language of money does not degrade. While the queen deployed money metaphors to coerce and disparage Silence, here Clermont proposes using money to escape a coercive situation, and the two-for-one exchange suggests a largesse and high esteem for France's honor that are in keeping with upper-class values. Perhaps Clermon's language suggests that the class system can be transformed, that feudal ties can be severed and monetary exchange take a more central role, in a way that is not so threatening, but can maintain the same values while the mechanics of class change.

The topos of the fair unknown always suggests both the possibility and impossibility of class fluidity. The pervasive language of money of *Silence*, however, poses a threat to the propriety of inheritance, rendered mystical in some fair unknown narratives by the inclusion of supernatural signs like the glowing light from the protagonist's mouth in *Havelok the Dane* and the angel that comforts his wife, or even the sword in the stone that reveals King Arthur's descent in many Arthurian romances. Money metaphors threaten to reduce that sublime passage of birthright to the revelation of mere economic fungibility, in which coins are exchangeable for sex on the one hand or for honor on the other. Even gender seems subject to exchange, as Silence's gender is exchanged at birth for wealth.

One pleasure of this economic thread for the audience is the flirtation with fabliau, an affinity that Sharon Kinoshita identifies in the young Silence's marriage to the king who is her great-uncle at the ending of the romance.[116] As Peter Dronke argues, fabliau and romance do not exist on a binary of serious courtly love and satiric fabliau love, but rather on a blended spectrum encompassing the "sublime or tragic to coarse or ridiculous."[117] Richard A. Schoaf, in reading the move from Chaucer's Knight's Tale to the Miller's Tale, sees a kind of counterfeiting in changing the genre rules from romance to fabliau and "repaying" one story with another from a different genre.[118] A similar transformation happens in *Silence* when the queen's reading of her own situation as a romance secret lovers topos gives way to the fabliau situational comedy of wrong parts and a would-be lover who "n'a poöir de Ii rien faire" (couldn't do anything for her, 3869) in his "nonpossance" (Roche-Mahdi translates this as "inertia," but "impotence" is perhaps

[116] Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides," 72.

[117] Peter Dronke, "The Rise of the Medieval Fabliau: Latin and Vernacular Evidence," *Romanische Forschungen* 85, no. 3 (1973): pp. 275-297, 298.

[118] R. A. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the World: Money, Images, and Reference in Late Medieval Poetry* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books 1983), 163-172.

better, 3975). The romance winks at Silence's missing member. As R. Howard Bloch argues, fabliaux are rife with sexual dismemberment, which can manifest in castrations or in dreamscapes "where phalluses are sold 'both retail and wholesale.'" "Detached sexual organs," he argues, "are an integral part of the representation of the body in the fabliaux and are more the rule than the exception."[119] For the fabliau, sexuality is highly material and highly negotiable, so that one organ may be exchanged for money or, perhaps, for another organ. In blending genres, *Silence* introduces the romance's ideas of class and inheritance to the material and commercial world of the fabliau while also demonstrating its ability to move between genre *kyndes*.

VI. "En la Sale Ot Moult Grant Escolt": Gender Reassignment and Suspense

I began this chapter by claiming that dramatic irony is at the heart of the fair unknown topos, with the audience in the know about the identity of the fair unknown and most of the characters ignorant. Silence's birth plays with this expectation by changing the element of Silence's identity that is in question and by having Cador know that he doesn't know the sex of the baby, while the other courtiers are unaware that there is any doubt. The end of the romance plays with dramatic irony again, this time using Merlin's laughter. Whereas Cador's ignorance was accompanied by hope and uncertainty, the dramatic irony in the concluding scenes involves Merlin's laughter and the rage of most of the other characters. Another distinction is that here, the audience's knowledge is only partial. We know about Silence's secret, but not the other sources of Merlin's laughter.

Narrative theorists distinguish between result-oriented suspense (uncertainty about what is going to happen) and process-oriented suspense (uncertainty about how it will happen).[120]

[119] R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1986), 63.

Unlike the novel, which has been a main subject of narrative theory, the romance heavily favors process-oriented suspense; most of the time, there is little doubt about what will happen in the romance. The repetition of topoi across romances makes plot events predictable, so that the audience knows that the heroine cast adrift in a rudderless boat will make landfall safely and ultimately be reunited with her family, or the calumniated queen will be vindicated and her children legitimated, or the youth will be knighted and will win fame for his knightly exploits. Repetition occurs, too, within a single romance, so that one protagonist will suffer repeated shipwrecks or family separations (and reunifications). If iteration were not enough, the romance narrator will often simply inform the audience of salient information; the reader in most cases knows the evil yet secret intentions of the bad steward, or the identity of the disguised tourneying knight. Result-oriented suspense is nearly absent from the medieval romance, yet the very iterative nature of the genre demonstrates that these texts continued (and continue) to generate interest and appetite. Perhaps, reading the romance is always an act of rereading because of the iterative quality of the genre. Concerning the problem of suspense in rereading the novel, Farner argues,

> A reason for rereading novels may be a need to check whether the work is still the same as the first time we read it. Just as we sometimes recheck the front door although we clearly remember having closed it, or just as a lottery winner needs repeated confirmation of the prize because he really cannot believe it, rereading a book is a kind of rechecking

[120] Geir Farner, *Literary Fiction: The Ways We Read Narrative Literature*, 273.

> the facts that entails suspense. This suspense is not very strong, however, or at any rate only as strong as the reader's need to recheck the facts of the action.[121]

It is probably safe to say that rereading the modern novel today is not the cultural phenomenon that reading the romance was in medieval Europe. Perhaps this difference--and the novel's frequent use of results-oriented suspense, lost on re-reading--explains the neuroticism Farner attributes to the novel re-reader, the somewhat compulsive need for reassurance.

For the romance, however, process-oriented suspense dominates. The audience anticipates how and when the awaited event will happen, with insertions of digressions, repeating episodes, and years narrated away often delaying the "when" and heightening the suspense. The audience also wonders, how will it feel when it happens this time? Will we forgive the king when he realizes his queen was falsely accused? Will the family reunification satisfy, or leave us feeling troubled? Will the problems raised in the narrative be contained by the ending? How will the romance fail to contain them? Before laughing at Silence, the king, the queen, and the queen's disguised lover, Merlin laughs at a peasant with new shoes, a leper begging at an abbey, and a body being buried. Although the audience lacks knowledge of why Merlin laughs at these three scenes, these episodes are extraneous to the plot except for what they do for suspense. Merlin's laughter, and the sequence of explaining these events and proving them, both serve to delay the exposure of events that *do* concern the plot (Silence's sex, the queen's lover) while simultaneously increasing the certainty that Merlin will correctly reveal the latter. And even the queen's male lover, disguised as a nun, is somewhat a plot twist but moreso a variation on her

[121] Farner, *Literary Fiction,* 279.

earlier failed seduction of Silence. The audience knows that the queen's queer, adulterous desires must be exposed, but the manner of exposure comes as a surprise.

For Patricia Parker, deferral is constitutive of romance. She defines romance by this act of delay:

> 'Romance' is characterized primarily as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object, a description which Fredric Jameson approaches from a somewhat different direction when he notes that romance, from the twelfth century, necessitates the projection of an Other, a *projet* which comes to an end when that Other reveals his identity or 'name.'[122]

In a typical fair unknown romance, like *Havelok the Dane*, the end is a recognition of the titular hero's birthright, his accession to the thrones of both England and Denmark, the brutal punishment of his former usurpers, the rewarding of his supporters, and the reaffirmation of "rightful" inheritance. *Havelok*'s ending, accordingly, is triumphal. After his conquests end, there is a naming of his wife's birthright:

> The Englishe men bigunne falle
> O knes, and greten swithe sore,
> And seyden, "Levedi, Kristes ore
> And youres! We haven misdo mikel
> That we ayen you have be fikel,

[122] Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1979), 4.

For Englond auhte for to ben

Youres and we youre men.

Is non of us, yung ne old,

That he ne wot that Athelwold

Was king of this kunerike

And ye his eyr, and that the swike

Haves it halden with mikel wronge -

God leve him sone to honge!" (2795-2807)

The Englishmen began to fall

On their knees, and to weep very sorely,

And said, "Lady, Christ's mercy

And yours! We have misdone much

That we have been fickle against you,

For England ought to have been

Yours, and we your men.

There is none of us, young nor old,

That he does not know that Athelwold

Was king of this country

And you his heir, and that the traitor

Has held it with much wrong -

God let him soon be hung!"

This naming literally restores the proper identity of Goldboru, Havelok's wife, by recognizing her descent, birthright, and by extension Havelok's inheritance by marriage. Ironically, in the logic of *Le Roman de Silence*, Goldboru would not be an heir and her father's kingdom would go to another male relative, not to her or her husband. In *Havelok the Dane,* however, Goldboru's identity and Havelok's identity are interlocked; it matters to the romance that they are perfectly matched, one the heir to England and the other to Denmark, both usurped as children by evil regents, both advancing up the social strata over the course of the romance to regain their rightful position. This passage names Goldboru as daughter of Athelwold and rightful heir, but it also reinscribes the events of the romance, and names the villain and looks ahead to his punishment (he will be tied backwards to a mare so that his face is in the horse's rear, then paraded around the kingdom before being burned at the stake; his children will also be disinherited as the final blow). Finally, the episode names the rightness and naturalness of male-preferred primogeniture (inheritance by men but potentially through female lines) by recognizing Havelok as the rightful King of England through his marriage to Goldboru. This is, finally, the delayed end of Parker's formulation.

That agnatic primogeniture (inheritance through male lines only) would later be practiced in the French monarchy alerts the modern audience that there is nothing inevitable or natural about male-preferred primogeniture, but there is no room for such doubts in *Havelok*'s triumphal resolution. This is the sort of ending a savvy romance audience might be primed to think of in reading *Silence*, which calls on the fair unknown topos and uses the same *kinemerk* birthmark in Silence's minstrel scene; though *Silence* probably predates the late 13th century *Havelok the Dane*, the latter represents an example of generic conventions rather than a source. The audience might wonder if a similar triumphal feeling will prevail when, inevitably, Silence is rightly

named, women are re-inherited, and the villains are punished—and whether a similar naturalizing of inheritance norms results.

Of course, not all romances are as triumphal and tidy as *Havelok the Dane*, and *Le Roman de Silence*'s ambivalent ending is also part of the tradition of the genre. In the fifteenth-century romance *Undo Your Door* or *The Squire of Low Degree*, the question of class mobility is raised when a lowly squire falls in love with the Princess of Hungary. In a pastiche of romance "aventure," she returns his love but presents a catalogue of knightly deeds he must accomplish and knightly finery he must wear before returning to her. An evil steward attacks the squire at her bedchamber door, and is killed, disfigured, and dressed in the squire's clothing. In a mashup of the romance topos of mistaken identity or disguise and the fabliau bed trick, the princess takes the corpse into her chamber where she keeps it by her bed and kisses it daily for seven years until it is falling apart. Though the romance ends with the expected, tidy conclusion of the squire's return and marriage to the princess, according to Nicola McDonald it "ensures that his eventual union with the princess (who spends those same seven years kissing a corpse) is never more than utterly contrived. In doing so, it undoes our confidence in romance's ability to contain the impulse to disorder that is inherent in desire."[123] In some ways, this romance is a total inversion of the fair unknown. The squire, unusually, shows some real class mobility by moving up the social strata to eventually become the King of Hungary without the help of a hidden birthright. The concealed identity of the romance reveals a mutilated, dead, evil steward with his own designs on the princess and thus on the throne. This marriage market is plagued by an unknown that is foul rather than fair. Like *Silence*, this romance plays with the movement of topoi across genre boundaries between romance and fabliau.

[123] Nicola McDonald, "Desire Out of Order and *Undo Your* Door," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34, no. 1 (2012): 247-275, 257.

In the meanwhile, *Silence* both employs and denies language to delay resolution and heighten suspense. French verse itself takes its time, stretching longer than English verse due perhaps to a combination of linguistic differences and preference for circumlocution and repetition; in any case, English translations or reworkings of French sources are typically shorter, sometimes greatly so. In this space of delay, *Silence* asks its audience: how will it feel when the awaited event happens? The king and his chorus of observers feel rage in the moment of suspense:

> Ainc por blecier, ne por quasscier,
> Ne por le roi ne volt lasscier,
> Et li roi ne volt lasscier,
> Que Merlins ne li volt mot dire.
>
> Neither wounds nor blows
> nor the presence of the king could make him stop,
> and the king was nearly beside himself with rage,
> because Merlin wouldn't tell him a thing. (6235-6238)

The king's rage reflects the tension of suspense, and the shift of power from the fictional king within the narrative to the narrator outside of the text (and, of course, the magician within the text), who knows and has already decided his fate. The rage also teases the audience: are you in suspense? Is the anticipation driving you mad? At the romance's climax, words create silence. The queen says, "Silences, trop avés parole! / Vos le devriez avoir plus brieve" (Silence, you talk

too much. / You had better keep your mouth shut, 6274-6275), reminding the audience that silence and tropes of concealment and unknowing have been at the center of the romance all along. Merlin substitutes laughter for words, and unlike the king, he finds pleasure in the suspense (because unlike the king, Merlin is outside the suspense and inflicting it on others):

Ne sevent pas dont li ris naist.
Com plus l'enquierent plus se taist.
Tant li delite li taisirs
Que parlers li est nonplaisirs.
Escoltés dont. Il prist a rire,
Atant a parler, et a dire
Que grief li est a comencier.
Li rois n'a cure de tencier,
N'onques no pot tençon amer.

The more they questioned him, the more silent he was.
He took such great delight in silence
that speech could offer him no pleasure.
Listen to what happened then: he began to laugh
and then to speak and then to say
that it was too hard for him to begin.
The king didn't feel like arguing;
He never had much use for disputes. (6280-6287)

What speech Merlin does offer only says that he cannot begin to say. His failure to speak recollects Merlin's time as a wild man in the woods, from which Silence must, ironically, retrieve him to the court and the world of human company and discourse. Enjambment further delays the audience's apprehension that Merlin's speech, "et a dire," is non-speech, "Que grief li est a comencier." For Giorgio Agamben, verse is created by the possibility of enjambment, which signals the disagreement between sonic and semantic units. The formal units of verse, the lines or end rhymes or stanzas, move at one pace while the semantic units, the sentences and clauses, move at a different pace. "This hanging-back, this sublime hesitation between meaning and sound is the poetic inheritance with which thought must come to terms."[124] Rendering the romance in verse slows it down, marking time with lines and end-rhyme and poetic circumlocution, and enjambment heightens and dramatizes the effect, allowing the poet to press the slowed and disjointed time of verse into the service of heightening the suspense of narrative. With the passage of time, Merlin's insistent silence causes the king's futile rage to also turn to silence. The romance itself, one great speech act that ought to offer pleasure, tumbles into a series of refusals of speech, all narrated, all marching through the formal rhythms of verse.

In a traditional fair unknown tale, the recognition scene would be full of speech acts, a triumphal reclamation of birthright that reaffirms the rightness of the class hierarchy and the protagonist's proper place in the world. The audience here feels something different than that reassurance, and this unease is heightened by the suspense. In spite of the romance's obsession with Merlin's speech, in the end his words fail to resolve the recognition problem and drastic action is required. After the literal enjambment of Merlin's speaking to say that he cannot speak,

[124] Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose* trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 41.

a kind of figurative enjambment happens in the action of the romance. Anticipation gives way to a sudden unsettled silence:

Sor cuer l'avoir la cors trestol[t]e.
Li rois en est encor en dolte.
Fait Merlin fermement tenir
Et doont a fait avant venir
La nonian, sil fait dispollier, ... [sic]
Et Silence despollier roeve.
Tost si com Merlins dist les trueve.
Tolt issi l'a trové par tolt.
En la sale ot moult grant escolt:
Nus n'i parla se li rois non,
U s'il nel conmanda par non.

The courtiers had no trouble believing the whole thing.
The king still had his doubts.
He had Merlin seized and held firmly,
and then had the nun brought forward and disrobed,
and he ordered Silence to be undressed.
It was just as Merlin had said:
he found everything in its proper place.
There was complete silence in the hall:

no one would speak except the king himself,

or whomever he commanded by name. (6567-6577)

Rather than a triumphal investiture in his birthright, our fair unknown is "despollier roeve," ordered to be stripped in a phrase carrying connotations of violence.[125] All that is left is silence and Silence. The king commands Silence to explain, and the command by name is silence. The youth, still naked, offers a brief retelling of events, in a nod to the classic recognition scene that removes the last vestiges of character ignorance and dramatic irony, but concludes, "Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir" (Now I wish to remain silent, 6627). This rather violent permutation of a recognition scene does not resolve the silence employed before the climax to generate suspense, but doubles down on it.

The scene also in some ways reverses a typical romance narrative direction, from loss or stripping-away to reclamation or re-clothing. For example, Elizabeth Fowler traces the journey of the titular character of *Sir Isumbras* through the lens of clothing, starting with his initial forced stripping to nakedness, through the reconstruction of his knightly armor, the donning of palmer's garb, the reclamation of his rich mantle, and finally investiture with kingly garments.[126] For this upward trajectory, Silence's nakedness looks like the beginning rather than the end. Though, putting clothing *on* can be equally problematic. In *Emaré*, the placing of the storied robe on the titular character accompanies her father's incestuous proposition and, as the text's editors note, she is frequently thereafter identified by the robe, as "worthy unthur wede" or a variation thereof.[127] After all, clothing can be as erotic as nakedness, in Emaré's case dangerously so.

[125] *DMF*, s.v. "Dépoullier (verbe)" (2020).

[126] Fowler, "The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in *Sir Isumbras*," 100-106.

However, by ending with the kind of violence romance audiences expect at the beginning, *Silence* turns the class logic of the fair unknown topos on its head. Rather than a reassuring conclusion that reinforces the naturalness of the class hierarchy, we are reminded of the artifice and concealment offered by clothing, that most basic marker of both class and gender, and of the naked, vulnerable body beneath.

For *Silence*, dangerous eroticism and nakedness come at the end of the romance, undercutting attempts to tidy the conclusion. Nature must spend three days remaking Silence to undo all of the work of Nurture and make Silence plausible as a woman--perhaps, then, "undoing" the events of the romance too. Alongside Nature, Merlin's supernatural knowledge is required to restore a semblance of order to both gender and inheritance, slotting Silence back into the courtly system. She becomes queen, but this is hardly a triumphal reclamation of inheritance. The king tries lamely to paper over the deafening silence at the end of the romance by offering a trite, conventional reading of the romance that would tidily knit back together the fractured relationship between gender and class *kyndes*:

> Silence, moult estes loials.
> Miols valt vertes ta loialtés
> Que ne face ma roialtés.
> Il n'est si preciose gemme,
> Ne tels tresors com bone feme.
> Nus hom ne poroit esproisier
> Feme qui n'a soig de boisier.

[127] See the note in *Emaré,* line 198.

Silences, ses qu'as recovré
Por cho que tu as si ovré?
Amer te voel *et* manaidier.

Silence, you are very loyal.
Indeed, the price of your loyalty
is far above that of my royalty.
There is no more precious gem,
nor greater treasure,
than a virtuous woman.
No man can assess the value
of a woman who can be trusted.
Silence, know that you have saved yourself
by your loyal actions.
I give you my friendship and protection. (6629-6639)

Loyalty, or *loialté*, can conveniently refer to either a person or to a piece of merchandise which conforms to standard regulations.[128] As a woman, Silence is now both person and valuable object of exchange. In reference to a person, *loialté* can capture the feudal relationships between men or the sexual fidelity expected of women. Loyalty helps to transition Silence from faithful knight to faithful wife, and "Amer te voel et menaidier" cinches the shift. "Amer" or "aimer" literally means "friend" but carries sexual connotations and makes a conventional play on "amer," or

[128] *DMF*, s.v. Loyal (adj.)

"bitter," undercutting the tidiness of Silence's reassignment. "Manaidier" means "ménager," carrying more paternalism than the translation to "protection" would imply: "Épargner de la fatigue, des soucis à une personne fragile, de santé délicate; traiter quelqu'un avec bonté, douceur (to save from fatigue and worries a fragile person of delicate health; to treat someone with kindness, gentleness).[129] This condescending and clichéd conclusion fails to satisfy the audience, fails to contain the mutually-destabilizing relationship between gender and class raised in the romance. The moment is intensely unpleasant rather than satisfying; the king is, after all, Silence's great-uncle, and ironically, the offer of protection also comes as Silence is still standing naked after the violent stripping of clothing, gender, and courtly role.[130]

Silence's stripping is a moment in which royal, courtly power, at the nadir of the class hierarchy, overtops Silence's masculine and knightly agency and ability to protect his own bodily integrity. From what will the king protect Silence, who thus far has been eminently capable of protecting himself? Only from the further elaboration of violent royal power, which orders the execution of both the queen and her lover. In order to earn this protection which is more properly a kind of forbearance, Silence must surrender his agency and make himself submissive to the patriarchal and feudal powers that be, averring, "Mes pere me fist asavoir" (My father did with me as he saw fit, 6592) and concluding, "Fates de moi vostre plaisir" (Do with me what you will, 6628). Silence's filial and class duty to obey father and king reintegrates class with gender; his duty to submit is the same across *kyndes*, whether he is a boy or a girl, a vassal or a wife. Silence slides seamlessly from dutiful son to dutiful wife, subjected at last to the king's desire. Ultimate patriarchal gender authority and kingly class authority at last find their fusion in violence and

[129] *Trésor de la Langue Française* s.v. "Ménager (verbe)" (1994).

[130] The text refers to Cador as Ebain's nephew several times, e.g. ll. 532, 609, 690, 691, 708.

power, a power that demands Silence's subjugation, using violence to strip his clothing and social role and violence to make vacant the role of queen and so slot Silence back into a new social role and *kynde*. How does the audience feel when the awaited recognition scene happens? The conclusion of the romance hurts, and in laying bare Silence it also lays bare what, in the end, the systems of gender and class have in common: violence and the power to dominate.

VII. "Fates de Moi Vostre Plaisir": Conclusion

The fair unknown is a broader topos than many others familiar in the genre of romance, often extending outside of a single episode to sprawl across the whole narrative arc. It pulls in other topoi, demanding a recognition scene at the end of the narrative, usually calling for a coming-to-knighthood moment in the middle, and often (though not necessarily!) beginning with a foundling. The fair unknown can describe a whole plot arc, but it's also more than that, also serving as an archetypal character and a point of view about social class, one predicated on hierarchy, essentialism, and primogeniture. *Le Roman de Silence* makes use of the familiarity of the fair unknown topos to introduce a twist, pairing class with gender. The story of social class might seem stable in a typical deployment of the fair unknown, neatly essentialized with the nobility naturally demonstrating their classed virtues and rising to the top. *Silence*, however, tells a story of instability and contingency: class and gender, another ostensibly stable system, come into conflict in this text. When the two barons who marry twin sisters are unable to determine which is older, the rightful heir does *not* naturally surface, and the artificiality of the inheritance system is exposed. King Ebain's response, however, focuses on the gender of the twins rather than the question of their seniority, and women as a *kynde* are made to pay the price for a failure of the classed inheritance system. Nonetheless, the king's preoccupation with their gender does

also reflect real questions about women's role in inheritance systems outside of their ability to give birth to heirs, questions that anticipate the French Salic law that will prevent inheritance through women but only through women. Merely by existing, women pose questions for the logic of inheritance that are potentially destabilizing.

King Ebain's attempts to shore up inheritance law, however, prove destabilizing to gender. At the same time, class remains a central concern as linguistic play explores the fungibility between money and concepts like honor and sexuality. When the Duke of Clermont advises the King of France to return Ebain's money two times over to preserve France's honor, the romance asks us, can money buy honor? And if it can, is it really money, then, that underlies class? What role does the inheritance of lands and titles play? At the same time, class and gender seem subject to exchange in strange ways. The two collide in the marriage market that King Ebain has upended by disinheriting women and drive Silence's negotiations of his unstable gender and class. In the process, he is driven from the court again and again, first to join the minstrels in an attempt to straddle gender roles with a set of skills he can use as a man or a woman. Silence's struggles to negotiate the queen's unwittingly queer desire sees him sent to France and finally exiled to the forest in search of Merlin. In the give-and-take between Silence's gender and the class prerogative of inheritance, is there no way Silence can solve his class and gender problems so that life at court becomes tenable? The romance builds suspense as it moves slowly towards an ending that genre conventions and audience expectations dictate must include a recognition scene, only to dramatically deliver an ending that willfully fails to contain the instabilities of class and gender. In failing to make the stability of class and gender seem inevitable and desirable, the romance keeps open an unsettling fungibility of *kynde*: while not

*inter*changeable, honor, class, gender, and sexuality are subject to change, exchange, and commerce.

Chapter 3

Transformation, Disguise, and Place in *William of Palerne*

I. "Þe Worse Bestow Nevere": Introduction

In the previous two chapters I have considered *kyndes* of race and religion in romances of monstrous birth and the sultan's marriage threat; and *kyndes* of class and gender by reading *Le Roman de Silence* as a fair unknown romance, while also imagining how genre itself can be thought of as a *kynde*. In this chapter I will turn to *kyndes* of species by examining animal disguises and transformation in *William of Palerne*, and I will also consider *kynde* not only as a category, but as an ethic. As well as describing types, the word *kynde* can have a moral meaning that, in Andrew Galloway's words, "combin[es] reciprocation, affinity, and the natural order."[131] This aspect of *kynde* takes particular prominence in genres such as devotional lyric, he argues: "Exploring the *double-entendre* of both the 'natural' and the 'moral' meanings of 'kyndenesse' must rank among the favorite verbal games of Middle English religious writers."[132] Like lyric, romances are, of course, not theology or religious manuals in genre terms. Rather than instruction, they use their component topoi to produce this moral meaning of kynde. This chapter explores the ethical force of topoi in *William of Palerne* as it stages species transformation.

As we have seen in the romances we have so far considered, many romances have rather violent endings that attempt (but commonly fail) to snap shut on the messy problems raised by their narratives. Thus *King of Tars* ends with the forced conversion or extermination of Saracens

[131] Galloway, "From Gratitudo to 'Kyndenesse'," 376.

[132] Galloway, "From Gratitudo to 'Kyndenesse'," 373.

and *Le Roman de Silence* has its protagonist violently stripped before the court and pushed into a feminine gender and a marriage with her great-uncle. Not all romances end so violently; the Man of Law's Tale ends with Custance reconciling with her husband Alla, though she returns to Italy after his death, as though the wounds inflicted by her time in Northumberland never quite healed. *Sir Gowther* ends with the hero absolved, married, and ruling piously, until dying peacefully. *William of Palerne* falls into the latter category, and it takes particular care throughout the narrative to push towards an ending that is kind. As I will show in this chapter, *William*'s moral kindness is driven by its play with *kynde* as identity and as nature. Moving into and deeply inhabiting animal *kyndes*, its heroes will experience vulnerability, not just of their bodies but also of the environment and the polity, that drives the desire for a kinder conclusion.

William of Palerne is an alliterative poem of the middle of the fourteenth century translated for Sir Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford, from the late thirteenth century French romance *Guilliaume de Palerne.*[133] In the missing first three leaves, the King and Queen of Sicily have a four-year-old son, William. The king's brother bribes the two ladies who care for him to poison the child, but a benevolent werewolf seizes William and runs off, swimming with him to the Italian mainland. Here the manuscript resumes when a cowherd finds William and brings him home to his wife. The werewolf leaves the child to be raised by the couple. We learn that the werewolf is Alphonse, the prince of Spain, transformed by his evil stepmother. William grows into a youth and is encountered by the Emperor of Rome, who takes him to court and gives him to his daughter Melior. Another leaf is lost, after which the poem picks up with Melior contemplating her love for William. Her lady Alisaundre uses magic to bring the couple together,

[133] Gerrit H.V. Blunt, "The Manuscript," in *William of Palerne: An Alliterative Romance* (Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1985), 14-21.

and they begin a love affair. During a rebellion, William is knighted and displays his worth on the battlefield, conquering the rebellious duke, ending the war, and earning acclaim.

Next, the emperor arranges Melior's marriage to the son of the Emperor of Greece, and William and Melior flee together, disguised in two white bearskins. Alphonse the werewolf assists them along the way. Back at the palace, Melior's absence is noticed and eventually the nature of their disguise comes to light. While on the run, they avoid quarry workers and colliers, eventually stowing away on a ship to Palermo, where they hide in the deer park of William's mother, now wearing deerskins. His father has since died and the King of Spain is waging a brutal war against Sicily because the queen has refused to marry her daughter to his son, Alphonse's younger half-brother. The queen learns that the two deer in her park are people who will save her from the war. She dons a deerskin of her own and goes out and talks to them, asking William to help her. He and Melior shed their deer disguises and William fights on the queen's behalf, eventually capturing the King of Spain and his son and so ending the war. When the Spanish king and his son are in the hall at Palermo, Alphonse, still in wolf form, enters and bows to his father before leaving. The king realizes that his wife has transformed Alphonse, so William summons her to Palermo to turn him back into a human. Alphonse reveals William's true identity and the events of the romance. William and Melior marry, and Alphonse marries the princess of Sicily. Alphonse's family members are forgiven and his half-brother is married to Alisaundre. Alphonse becomes King of Spain and William is crowned Emperor of Rome.

Guillaume de Palerne has attracted much more critical attention than *William*. Early criticism has typically looked at *Guillaume* in relation to Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, influencing an ongoing interest in Alphonse the werewolf. For example, Noah Guynn in the 2013 collection *From Beasts to Souls* examines the werewolves in *Bisclavret* and *Guillaume* to think

about material hybridity and gender; and in her 2001 *Metamorphosis and Identity*, Caroline Walker Bynum reads *Guillaume* and a werewolf episode from Gerald of Wales against theological and philosophical texts to probe medieval attitudes to metamorphosis and the body.[134] Curtis Rundsletter, in contrast, has compared the werewolf Alphonse to modern studies of wild wolves to consider how the figure of the werewolf can undercut the negative, frightening connotations of wolves and forests in the Middle Ages.[135]

Others have considered animality more broadly, such as Peggy McCracken in her 2017 *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France,* which considers animal skins as a surface for writing and treats the figure of the werewolf in relation to sovereignty.[136] Jamie McKinstry, in his 2015 *Middle English Romance and the Craft of Memory*, takes up the animal imagery in fictive dreams as well as in the disguises and transformations of *William of Palerne* to consider how animals function as memorable metaphors in romance.[137] Still others have linked animality to race, as in Lisa Lamper-Weissig's study of the Sicilian setting of *Guillaume,* or class as in Angela Florschuetz's work on the vulnerability of patrilineal inheritance in *William* and in Randy Schiff's interpretation of animality as expressing class hierarchy.[138]

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[134] Noah D. Guynn, “Hybridity, Ethics, and Gender in Two Old French Werewolf Tales,” in *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*, ed. E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books 2001).

[135] Curtis Rundstedler, "The Benevolent Medieval Werewolf in *William of Palerne*," *Gothic Studies* 21, no. 1 (2019): 54–67.

[136] Peggy McCracken, *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[137]Jamie McKinstry, *Middle English Romance and the Craft of Memory*. Studies in Medieval Romance. (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer 2015).

[138] Lisa Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, Postcolonial Literary Studies Series (Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Angela Florschuetz, “Bad Blood: Patrilineal Inheritance and the Body of the Heir in William of Palerne,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 42, no. 1 (2020): 147–82; Randy P. Schiff, "Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal: Primal Courtliness in *Guillame de Palerne* and *William of Palerne, Exemplaria* 21, no. 4 (2009): 418-438.

Among critics of the romance as a genre, one strand of thought has considered romances as a genre to be essentially didactic, foreclosing interpretive possibilities as they propagandize a rigid class system. As we have seen in *Roman de Silence*, class plays a significant role in the genre, and topoi such as the fair unknown can support or subvert the naturalization of class. However, class is far from the only issue at stake in this genre, and the romance tendency to open up questions and explore possibilities that cannot be contained by the ending means that romances are far richer than simple propaganda. That some readers will refuse to consider the interpretive possibilities raised by the conflicts in a romance does not negate those possibilities; reading a lack of ambiguity into romance is, ironically, an interpretive choice made possible by the very open-endedness that this reading would deny. To take one example of this mode of criticism, Randy Schiff writes of *William of Palerne*,

> If Ad Putter is correct in describing the "social function of courtly romance" as fundamentally "instructive," then William's choices in translating *Guillaume* make clear that he targets non-French-speaking consumers for literary lessons in the durability and violence of social hierarchy...rendering William's use of translation to defend aristocratic dominance part of a self-interested program of maintaining feudal privileges against socio-economic pressures from below.[139]

Unfortunately, much of Schiff's argument hinges on a somewhat tenuous close reading. He takes up a moment when the lovers, having fled from the quarry, hide in the woods. Colliers arrive, and one expresses his desire to find and turn over the lovers:

[139] Schiff, "Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal," 423.

> Þen was Meliors neiȝ mad almost for fere,
> lest þat foule felþe schold have hem founde þere,
> and darked stille in hire den for drede, boute noyse.
> Wiȝtly another werkman þat was þerbeside
> gan flite wiþ þat felþe þat formest hadde spoke.
>
> Then was Melior just about crazed with fear, lest that foul filth should have found them there, so she lay hidden in her den, silent and afraid. Soon, another workman nearby began to argue with that filth who had just spoken. (translation Schiff's)[140]

In Schiff's reading,

> The poet William performs an act of ironic class warfare, reducing all laborers to the status of filth while according a purely ethical nobility to one of the colliers... Both the vindictive worker, with his *schadenfreude* at the noble fugitives' plight and his unseemly zeal to be an informant, and the clearly ethical worker, who sympathizes with the lovers' cause and condemns his colleague's meanness, are categorized as "felþe."[141]

However, "felþe" does not necessarily refer to both the good and bad collier; there is no reason to assume that the first "felþe" is a collective noun rather than referring specifically to the collier who wants to turn in the lovers, and the only time the poet refers specifically to the good collier

[140] Lines in *William*: 2541-25. Quoted in Schiff p. 419.

[141] Schiff, "Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal," 419-420.

he calls him a "werkman."[142] Rather, the passage differentiates the peasants from one another, showing a range of moral attitudes that, as we have seen in *Silence*, more traditionally were thought to inhere in class. The presence of the colliers also punctures the romance topos of the forest as a site for knights to encounter marvels and so prove themselves. Though many forests were owned by the crown or by nobility, they were worked and inhabited by large numbers of peasants, a fact typically rendered invisible by the genre.[143] The appearance of lower-class characters is limited in romance, but in *William* there are so many kinds of lower-class occupations visible that Schiff at one point confuses the colliers with the stoneworkers who feature in the previous episode.[144] In another, sense, though, the colliers are perfect representatives of romance: debating the outcome they desire for the lovers, the colliers manifest the dialogic and experimental nature of the genre, which invites readers to interpret the text rather than asserting a unitary, didactic message.

Schiff draws on Agamben's argument that "the figure of the werewolf plays a powerful role in instituting sovereignty: revealing the limits of jurisdiction, the banning (and return) of the hybrid demonstrates the continuity of aristocratic privilege between nature and the state."[145] For Agamben, an essential quality of the werewolf is its ability to move back and forth between animal and human forms, typically (as in Marie de France's *Bisclavret*) by donning and removing

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[142] The text names these workers as "choliers þat cayreden col come þerebiside, / and oþer wiȝes þat were wont wode forto fecche" (colliers that carried (char)coal came there beside, / and other men that were wont to fetch wood. 2520-2521). Though "collier" would later come to refer to coal miners, in this period it seems to refer to charcoal burners, an association strengthened by the connection to men fetching wood. See MED s.v. colier and OED s.v. collier. The use of the term "collier" to denote a particularly wicked person also seems to postdate this text, appearing first in the 16th century, though signs of that association may be visible in this scene—whether they worked with charcoal or coal, the job of a collier would be exceptionally dirty.

[143] J. Birrell, "Peasant Craftsmen in the Medieval Forest," *AHR* 12 (1969).

[144] Schiff, "Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal," 420.

[145] Schiff, "Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal," 421.

human clothes. Curiously, this trait is absent in the werewolf of *William*, who is made a wolf by his stepmother until near the end of the romance. For *William*, the bear and deer disguises of the lovers are easier to remove, although even here the lovers seem strangely reluctant to do so. Though the werewolf in *Bisclavret*, on which Agamben draws, loses his agency to transform when his wife hides his clothing, Alphonse the werewolf in *William* never possesses this ability at all.

Another way that *William* differs from both *Bisclavret* and Agamben's analysis is in the fate of the stories' villains. Besides being tortured by the king, the wife in *Bisclavret* is attacked by the werewolf and "Le neis li esracha del vis" (he tore the nose from her face), a punishment that is transmitted lineally to the victim's female descendents who "senz nes sunt nees / e si viveient esnasees" (were born without noses / and lived noseless).[146] For Agamben, punishment, especially with physical violence, is key to the symbolic valence of the werewolf and the sovereign power it represents: “in Hobbes, the foundation of sovereign power is to be sought not in the subjects’ free renunciation of their natural right but in the sovereign’s preservation of his natural right to do anything to anyone, which now appears as the right to punish.”[147]

William begins to recreate this scene but pulls back. The romance characters discover the truth of Alphonse's identity from his courtly act of bowing to his father rather than through the violence of *Bisclavret's* attack on and the king's subsequent torture of the wife. When Alphonse's stepmother is summoned to Palerne, the werewolf arrives intending to kill her in a protracted scene with a rare deployment of result-oriented suspense:[148]

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[146]Marie de France, "Bisclavret," in *Lais de Marie de France* trans. Laurence Harf-Lancner, ed. Karl Warnke (Livre de Poche 1990), 235, 313-314.

[147] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP 1995), 106.

[148] Farner, *Literary Fiction,* 273.

he stared on his stepmoder stifli a while,
whan he saw [hire] with his sire sitte in murþe.
Ful wroþ þan þat werwolf wax of þat siȝt,
and bremly his bristeles he gan þo areise,
and grisiliche gapande with a grym noyse
he queite toward þe quene to quelle hire as blive. (4339-4344)

He stared on his stepmother intently a while,
when he saw her with his sire sitting in mirth.
Very angry then that werewolf grew because of that sight,
and fiercely his bristles he then began to raise,
and horribly gaped and with a grim noise
he lunged toward the queen to kill her swiftly.

This extended scene emphasizes Alphonse's terrifying animal qualities, describing his bristling fur, gaping mouth, and languageless growls. The audience is justified in expecting the attack to be completed as it is in *Bisclavret* (albeit there not lethally). However, here the stepmother cries out to William for mercy, and she receives it:

William ful wiȝtli þe werwolf þan hent
anon in his armes aboute þe necke,
and sayde to him soberli, "Mi swete dere best,

trust to me as treuli as to þin owne broþer,

or as feiþli as falles þe fader to þe sone;

and meke þe of þi malencoli, for marring of þiselve.

I sent after hire for þi sake, soþli þou trowe." (4357-4363)

William very quickly the werewolf then caught

at once in his arms about the neck,

and said to him soberly, "My sweet dear beast,

trust to me as truly as to your own brother,

or as faithfully as behooves the father to the son;

and humble yourself of your rage,[149] lest you injure yourself.

I sent for her for your sake, believe truly."

Alphonse's bodily attack is displaced by an affectionate embrace and his fearsome animal qualities are disarmed with William's address to his "sweet dear beast." William recalls to Alphonse the bonds of human familial relationships and foreshadows his own relationship to Alphonse, who will marry his sister. In contrast to Agamben's claim that the sovereign retains the right to do anything to anyone, which is enacted as punishment, Alphonse must humble himself

[149] Although in modern usage "melancholy" would suggest sadness, the MED has "anger, rage, hatred" as a possible meaning, for which it cites this passage as one example. Indeed, the illness called "melancholy" was considered by some classical thinkers to be caused, at least part of the time, by the cooking of yellow bile (choler) into black bile, causing anger followed by fear and sadness. Intriguingly, Galen includes "bestial hallucinations" as a symptom. See Keith Andrew Stewart, *Galen's Theory of Black Bile: Hippocratic Tradition, Manipulation, Innovation* (Boston: BRILL, 2018), 129-136.

("meke þe"), a relinquishment of sovereign power that runs counter to the privileged figure of the werewolf.[150]

Alphonse's stepmother is not the only villain who receives *kyndenesse* in this romance. The Spanish king and prince who wage war on William's mother are captured rather than killed and eventually freed by William, and the prince marries Melior's lady Alisaundre. Even the two ladies who conspire to kill baby William come forward for judgment and yet are allowed to live. Apart from the two battle sequences, one when William captures the rebellious Duke of Saxony and the other in which William must defeat the Spanish army to protect Palerne, no one dies in this romance. This is unusual. As we have seen in *King of Tars*, romances are often gleeful and thorough in meting out punishment to their villains. Athelwold, one of the usurping stewards in *Havelok the Dane*, receives the following punishment:

> And demden him to binden faste
> Upon an asse swithe unwraste,
> Andelong, nouht overthwert,
> His nose went unto the stert
> And so to Lincolne lede,
> Shamelike in wicke wede,
> And, hwan he come unto the borw,
> Shamelike ben led ther thoru,
> Bi southe the borw unto a grene,

[150] Though the threat of violence still hangs over the scene: if the stepmother does not restore Alphonse's form, "to cold coles sche schal be brent ȝit or come eve" (to cold coals she will be burnt yet before evening comes, 4367).

That thare is yet, als I wene,

And there be bunden til a stake,

Abouten him ful gret fir make,

And al to dust be brend rith there.

And yet demden he ther more,

Other swikes for to warne:

That hise children sulde tharne

Everemore that eritage

That his was, for hise utrage. [151]

And sentenced him to be bound fast

Upon a very wretched ass,

Lengthwise, not straddling,

His nose went into the tail

And so was to Lincoln led,

Shamefully in poor clothing,

And, when he came to the town,

Shamefully was led through there,

By the south of the town to a green,

That is still there, as I know,

And there be bound to a stake,

[151] *Havelok the Dane,* in *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston* eds. Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications 1997), 2820-2837.

About him a very big fire make,

And all to dust burn right there.

And yet sentenced he further,

To warn other traitors:

That his children should be deprived

Evermore of that heritage

That was his, for his crime.

This passage follows a scene in which Englishmen beg "Merci" (Mercy, 772) and swear allegiance to Havelok, and then six earls further beg for mercy and suggest that Athelwold, the usurper, be punished. In this episode, mercy will be granted in general to the people of England, but more time will be spent reveling in the humiliating punishment of the villain which, as in *Bisclavret*, will accrue to his descendents as well. Athelwold's crime is similar to that of the two ladies in *William*: both have attempted to kill a child heir as part of a usurpation plot. The ladies, however, receive the lighter punishment of being sent to a hermitage to pray and do penance.

The villains of the romance *Le Bone Florence of Rome* also suffer from elaborate punishments, this time a blend of divine and princely. By the end of the romance, the longsuffering heroine Florence has won fame as a healer, and all of her past persecutors have been struck with various grisly ailments:

Mylys that hur aweye ledd,

He was the fowlest mesell bredd,

Of pokkys and bleynes bloo.

And Machary þat wolde hur haue slayne,

He stode schakyng the sothe to sayne,

Crokyd and crachyd thertoo.

The marynere þat wolde haue layne hur by,

Hys yen stode owte a strote forthy,

Hy lymmes were roton hym froo.

They put Clarebalde in a whelebarowe,

That strong thefe be stretys narowe,

Had no fote on to goo.[152]

Mylys that led her away,

He was the foulest leper bred,

Of pocks and pustules blue.

And Machary that would have killed her,

He stood shaking to tell the truth,

Crooked and scratched too.

The mariner that would have lain by her,

His eyes stood out bulging consequently,

His limbs were rotten off him.

They put Clarebalde in a wheelbarrow,

That strong thief by streets narrow,

Had no foot to walk on.

[152] *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, ed. Carol Falvo Heffernan (New York: Manchester University Press 1976), 2020-2032. Subsequently cited in text.

The villains are each identified here by their crimes against Florence. She requires them to confess, which they do publicly, reiterating the events of the romance. Florence heals them, but her fiancé Emere immediately has them burnt:

> The venome braste owt of hys ere,
> He seyde, "I fynde you iiii in fere,"
> Hys herte was full throo.
> He made to make a grete fyre,
> And caste þem yn wyth all þer tyre. (2116-2120)

> The venom burst out of his ears,
> He said, "I find you four in cahoots,"
> His heart was very angry.
> He caused a great fire to be made,
> And cast them in with all their attire.

Like *Havelok*, *Florence* stages a public humiliation followed by execution by burning. Both romances use legalistic language to emphasize that the villains' fate is a punishment: for *Havelok*, the verb is "demden," ("to pass judgment on, to sentence") and for *Florence*, "fynde," ("to judge, to return a verdict").[153] *Florence* also contains an implied plea for mercy in that the villains must seek out Florence for healing from their ailments. As in *Havelok*, however, mercy

[153] *MED* s.v. demden, fynde

can only go so far: the romance must have its execution. These other romances seem to demonstrate the punishing power of the sovereign far more clearly than *William*, despite the presence of the werewolf in the latter.

Schiff describes *William* as "deploy[ing] the animal violence of a werewolf-noble to naturalize the aggression at the heart of the hierarchical feudal state."[154] In a scene that he says "depict[s] significant violence in the service of sustaining the aristocrats' flight," Alphonse knocks down a churl and steals his food:[155]

> þe werwolf ful wiȝtli went to him evene
> wiþ a rude roring, as he him rende wold,
> and braid him doun be þe brest bolstraȝt to þe erþe. (1850-1852)

> the werewolf very quickly went right up to him
> with a fierce roaring, as if he would mangle him,
> and flung him down by the breast sprawling to the earth.

To be sure, this moment is violent and physical. But is it significantly so? By the standard of romances, this scene is mild. As in the episode with the stepmother, Alphonse pulls back from his lunge. Unlike that episode, here the churl has never been in real danger. The werewolf's attack is "*as if* he would mangle him" ("*as* he him rende *wold*"), leaving no doubt with the audience that the charge is a frightening bluff. That the churl scurries away, robbed but grateful to be alive,

[154] Schiff, "Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal," 427.

[155] Schiff, "Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal," 426.

may even be read as comic. For an audience accustomed to gruesome and protracted scenes of humiliation and execution, this episode presents a gentle bit of peril that culminates, as so much of *William* does, in mercy. If punishment is the core of the werewolf-sovereign's power, *William of Palerne* seems oddly reluctant to exercise it.

The text is, in this way, *kynde*: kind. In this meaning of the word, *kynde* captures a sense of the ethical that is affective and naturalized, exemplified by the cowherd's wife who responds readily to the need of the baby William: "Sche kolled it ful kindly and askes is name" (she embraced it very kindly and asks its name, 69) and again, "þis litel barn, / þat þe kinde kowherde wif kepte ful fayre" (this little baby, / that the kind cowherd's wife cared for very well, 170-171). This sense of kindness, first experienced by the baby William, carries through to the denouement of the romance. As he tearfully bids William goodbye, the cowherd delivers parting advice that also serves as a meditation on courtliness and the ethical impetus of the romance:

> ...Þou swete sone, seþþe þou schalt hennes wende,
> whanne þou komest to kourt, among þe kete lordes,
> and knowest alle þe kuþþes þat to kourt langes,
> bere þe boxumly and bonure, þat ich burn þe love;
> be meke and mesurabul, nouȝt of many wordes;
> be no tellere of talis, but trewe to þi lord;
> and prestely for pore men profer þe ever
> for hem to rekene wiþ þe riche in riȝt and in skille.
> Be fei3tful and fre and ever of faire speche,
> and servisabul to þe simple so as to þe riche,

and felawe in faire manere, as falles for þi state;

so schaltow gete Goddes love and alle gode mennes.

Leve sone, þis lessoun me lerde my fader,

þat knew of kourt þe þewes, for kourteour was he long;

and hald it in þi hert, now I þe have it kenned:

þe bet may þe bifalle, þe worse bestow nevere. (229-344)

...Oh sweet son, since you shall go hence,

when you come to court, among the bold lords,

and know all the customs that to the court belong,

bear yourself humbly and graciously, so that I will love you as a man;

be meek and measured, not of many words;

be no teller of tales, but true to your lord;

and promptly for poor men offer yourself ever

for them to reckon with the rich and right and in skill.

Be faithful and generous and ever of fair speech,

and serviceable to the simple as much as to the rich,

and a good friend in proper conduct, as befits your rank;

so shall you get God's love and all good men's.

Dear son, this lesson my father taught me,

that knew of court the proper conduct (or morals), for courtier was he long;

and hold it in your heart, now I have taught it to you:

that the better may befall you, the worse be thou never.

Kindness, the cowherd says, is the heart of courtliness, and it is the most important lesson William must learn. As we will see, however, the bulk of his ethical education continues to occur outside the confines of the court.

Class is always at stake in romance, and *William of Palerne* with its fair unknown hero, dispossessed werewolf prince, and princess eschewing a prince for a foundling is no exception. However, I read *William* not as a paean to the invincibility of the elite, but the opposite: a romance interested in the vulnerability of the body, the landscape, and even the polity. Whereas *Silence* is a fair unknown romance that transforms the gender of its protagonist, *William* is another fair unknown text that experiments with transformations of species, exploring the borderlands between disguise and transformation and between the forest and the court. In the fair unknown topos, the hero's identity is concealed from himself, but in the related topos of disguise, the hero or heroine conceals their identity from other characters, allowing them to move through spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible. Thus, for example, Uther assumes a magical disguise as the Duke of Tintagel to enable him to enter Igraine's bedchamber; in *King Horn,* Horn assumes a pilgrim's disguise to enter the forced wedding of his lover Rimenhild; and in *Floris and Blancheflour*, Floris's merchant disguise enables him to enter the impenetrable tower in which Blancheflour is held. *Le Roman de Silence* flips the script when Silence assumes the guise of a minstrel to exit rather than enter a space, fleeing the courtly world that seems untenable for a girl in boy's clothes. Silence's disguise enables him to (temporarily) flee from sexuality rather than consummate it. Disguise is so ubiquitous in romance that it can be turned to almost any situation, but as these examples show, disguise very often uses a temporary transgression of class to bring lovers together. *William of Palerne* moves across not class but

species as, like Silence, its protagonists flee the hostile world of the court. By pairing disguise with transformation the romance probes the boundaries between seeming and becoming, human and animal, forest and court. These unstable and vulnerable bodies move through a physical landscape that is likewise rendered unstable and vulnerable by the effects of war but stabilized by *kyndenesse*.

II. "Swiche Prey to Finde": The Hunted Hero

In her essay "The Condition of *Kynde,*" Nicolette Zeeman takes up *kynde* in *Piers Plowman*, particularly in its ethical dimensions. She argues,

> Langland's notion of *kynde* is moral, communitarian, familial, "kindly", loving, experiential, bodily; it is associated with the proper use and sharing of material goods and a positive view of the life and functioning of the body. Langland extends his notion of the kynde to include the possibility of a kynde relation between God and the creation which he entered and redeemed. However, Langland's kynde is also associated with a condition of lack.[156]

Though it largely eschews the theological and didactic elements of *Piers Plowman*, *William* shares its interest in the ethical dimensions of *kynde* and in its work of stripping back the trappings of civilization to get at the meat (so to speak) of *kynde*. A feature that sets *William of Palerne* apart from other romances is the pronounced vulnerability of its hero. Two triumphal battle sequences notwithstanding, William spends much of the romance on the run, hunted,

[156] Nicolette Zeeman, "The Condition of *Kynde*," in *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall* ed. David Aers (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2000), 1-2.

wearing not armor but animal skin. His journey to find his place in the world often takes the form of a search for a physical place that will provide safety and refuge for him and his lover. *William of Palerne* is a fair unknown romance more like *Havelok* than *Silence*, a more typical example that coincides with the foundling topos. The romance takes particular interest in the vulnerability of the baby in the woods, even though he has a protector in the werewolf that rescues him in the lost opening of the text. Baby William is found by a cowherd when his hound picks up the child's scent:

> Þe couherdes hound þat time, as happe bytidde,
> feld foute of þe child and fast þider fulwes;
> and sone as he hit seiȝ, soþe forto telle,
> he gan to berke on þat barn and to baie it hold. (32-35)

> The cowherd's hound at that time, as it happened,
> found the track of the child and closely followed there;
> and as soon as he saw it, truth to tell,
> he began to bark at that baby and to hold it to bay.

The word "foute" connotes the scat or track of a game animal, casting William as a prey animal hunted by the cowherd's dog.[157] The association is strengthened when the cowherd, bringing the baby home, refers to it as his prey:

[157] *MED*, s.v. fute.

Þe cherl ful cherli pat child tok in his armes
and kest hit and clipped and oft Crist þonkes,
þat hade him sent þe sonde swiche prey to finde. (62-64)

The churl very lovingly took that child in his arms
and kissed it and embraced it and often thanked Christ,
that he had sent him the providence such prey to find.

William's status as a prey animal follows him as he grows up. When William is a boy, the Roman Emperor goes on a boar hunt in the area but becomes separated from his hunting party. Two hunters converge on William when the emperor follows the werewolf, itself engaged in a hunt, to William himself.

Þemperour on his stif stede a sty forþ þanne takes
to herken after his houndes oþer horn schille;
so komes þer a werwolf riȝt bi þat way þenne
grimly after a gret hert, as þat God wold,
and chased him þurth chaunce þere þe child pleide. (212-216)

The emperor on his staunch steed then takes a path forth
to harken after his hounds or loud horn;
so comes there a werewolf right by that way then
grimly after a great hart, as God willed,

and chased him by chance where the child played.

Like the cowherd before him, the emperor accepts William as the prey of his hunt and brings the boy home with him, gifting the youth to his daughter with the explanation, "I hent þis at hunting, swiche haþ God me sent" (I caught this hunting, such has God sent me, 414). This episode doubles the episode of William's discovery by the cowherd, reinscribing his status as both foundling and game animal.

These childhood episodes set up William's time on the run with his beloved, Melior, a series of episodes that make up a large portion of the romance. When the pair decide to flee Melior's impending marriage to the son of the Emperor of Greece, they adopt bear disguises by having themselves sewn into bearskins. Bears may seem fearsome and predatory animals, and indeed are described as "breme," which could mean "huge" or "ferocious."[158] In Norse texts, bears are strongly associated with berserkers, who transformed into bears and whose name, *berserk,* may derive from the word for bearskin.[159] However, here the bears are associated, somewhat unusually, with food. Alisaundre, Melior's cousin and confidante, seeks the skins "In þe kechene, wel I knowe, arn crafti men manye / þat fast fonden alday to flen wilde bestes," (In the kitchen, well I know, there are many crafty men / that quickly assay all day to flay wild beasts, 1681-1682). Historically, there was a highly specialized economy for butchering and skinning animals. The production of leather was divided from the production of furs, which was overseen by a skinner or furrier. The furrier often bought pelts from peddlers or chapmen,

[158] *MED* s.v. brem(e

[159] Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge 2022), 166.

middlemen who bought the pelts from foresters, huntsmen, and villagers.[160] The location of the hides in the kitchen, by contrast, focuses attention on the bear as food and game animal rather than as fur-bearer or predator, an emphasis further strengthened by the poem's language when Melior lurks in the kitchen "til sche say tidi time hire prey for to take" (until she saw timely opportunity to take her prey, 1710).

However, bears were somewhat unusual game animals in the late Middle Ages. Bears were hunted to extinction in England during the eleventh century, though they remained in France, where *Guillame de Palerne*, the source text for the romance, was produced.[161] Many French hunting manuals, however, did not include bears; one exception is the influential *Livre de chasse* by Gaston Fébus who includes bears as "common" game but rates their meat as poor and passes over their skin in silence. Notably, Gaston Fébus was from the Pyrenees, where bears indeed remained common; in England and much of France, bears may have increasingly come to be seen as exotic animals.[162] Alfonso XI of Castile, an avid bear hunter, writes in his *Code of the Freedom and Rights of Huntsman* about how to distribute the spoils of a hunt; he includes the bearskin, but grants a meal to the hunter rather than a cut of bear meat, suggesting that bears were not eaten at his court.[163] Yet, bears were not particularly prized as furbearers; among the common furs worn in later medieval Western Europe were miniver, ermine, white Russian

[160] Dale Serjeantson, "Animal Remains and the Tanning Hide," in *Diets and Crafts in Towns: The Evidence of Animal Remains from the Roman to the Post-Medieval Periods*, ed. Dale Serjeantson and T Waldron (Oxford, UK: BAR Publishing 1989), 129.

[161] H. Klemettilä, *Animals and Hunters in the Late Middle Ages: Evidence from the BnF MS fr. 616 of the Livre de chasse by Gaston Fébus* (New York: Routledge 2015), 24.

[162] John Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk: The Art of Medieval Hunting* (London: Weidenfelt & Nicolson 1988), 120.

[163] Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk,* 257-269.

weasel, ermine, and sable for the nobility; fox, wild cat, lamb, and rabbit for the emerging middle classes; and rabbit or kid for peasants.[164]

Nonetheless, the romance insists on the bears as game animals, somewhat defanging their potential as predators with a comic episode in which the disguised lovers are spotted by a Greek man:

> Þan ȝede a grom of Grece in þe gardyn to pleie,
> to bihold þe estres and þe herberes so faire;
> and or he wiste, he was war of þe white beres;
> þei went awai a wallop, as þei wod semed.
> And neiȝ wod of his witt he wax neiȝ for drede,
> and fled as fast homward as fet miȝt drie,
> for he wend witterly þei wold him have sewed
> to have mad of him mete and murþered him to deþe. (1767-1774)

> Then went a young man of Greece into the garden to enjoy himself,
> to behold the estates and the gardens so fair;
> and before he knew it, he was aware of the white bears;
> they went away at a gallop, as they seemed mad.
> And near mad out of his wits he grew for dread,
> and fled as intently homeward as feet might do,

[164] Aleksander Pluskowski, "Communicating Through Skin and Bone: Appropriating Animal Bodies in Medieval Western Seigneruial Culture," in *Breaking and Shaping Beastly Bodies: Animals as Material Culture in the Middle Ages* ed. Aleksander Pluskowski (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), 36-37.

for he supposed plainly they would have followed him

to have made of him food and murdered him to death.

The passage puns on "herberes,"[165] meaning "gardens," but also suggesting the bears themselves, who are shockingly out of place in the enclosed gardens that blur the boundaries between wild and built spaces but nonetheless hew more closely to the courtly world that encloses them. Then the poet adds the conventional pun of "wod," both "mad" and "woods," the place that bears more properly belong. Both the Greek man and the bears are "wod" and both are fleeing in fear. The supposed bears are fleeing humans and the Greek man flees the bears, certain they will see him as food when the bears themselves have in fact recently been food. When he relates his brush with death, "þanne were his felawes fain for he was adradde, / and lauȝeden of þat gode layk" (then were his fellows delighted that he was afraid, / and laughed at that good amusement, 1783-1784). When the lovers' disguise is later figured out, the hunt for William and Melior becomes literal: "Þan hastely hiȝed eche wiȝt on hors and on fote, / huntyng wi[þ] houndes alle heie wodes" (Then hastily hurried each man on horse and on foot, / hunting with hounds in all lofty woods, 2177-2178).

Why, then, do the lovers disguise themselves as bears, which are neither typical prey nor act in this romance as convincing predators? Bears offered some association with lovers, or at least with lust; the animals were thought to be lustful themselves, mating continuously until they gave birth, resulting in cubs that were formless like the baby in *King of Tars* until the mother licked them into shape. They were also thought by some to have sex like humans, facing each

[165] *MED* s.v. herber

other.[166] The "soft, nontasty" meat of the bear, too, was thought to induce lust in people.[167] In his monograph on bears, Michel Pastoreau recounts erotic bear disguises that share some resemblances to William's flight with Melior:

> But, according to several literary and narrative works, all written by men, the male bear, with his virile appearance, his savage strength, and his luxuriant fur, still held a mysterious attraction for women. The bear's fur, above all, seemed to charm them, even to provoke sexual excitement. As a result, at court and in villages, young vigorous men took advantage of major seasonal festivals or even simple celebrations to disguise themselves as hairy creatures halfway between a bear and a devil or wild man. In this animal disguise, they approached young women, performed suggestive dances in front of them, played at frightening them, and then pretended to abduct or sexually assault them—sometimes really doing so.[168]

The bear disguises, then, could be appropriate for William and Melior as lovers absconding from her home, though the hart and hind disguises they don later are perhaps even more conventional symbols for lovers.

Alisaundre offers a more pragmatic yet nonetheless still ambivalent reasoning:

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[166] Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk,* 121.

[167] Hanele Klemettilä, *Animals and Hunters in the Late Middle Ages: Evidence from the BnF MS fr. 616 of the* Livre de chasse *by Gaston Fébus* (New York: Routledge 2015), 77.

[168] Michel Pastoureau, *The Bear: History of a Fallen King* trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011), 204.

Ac þe bremest best þe beres me semen,

þe gon most grisli to eche gomes si3t.

Mi3t we be coyntise com bi tvo skynnes

of þe breme beres, and bisowe 3ou þerinne,

þer is no livand lud ilive 3ou knowe schold.

But hold 3ou ou3t of heie gates for happes, I rede.

Rediliche no better red be resun I ne knowe

þan to swiche a bold beste best to be disgised,

for þei be alle maners arn man likkest. (1686-1694)

But the fiercest beast the bears seem to me,

they are most terrible to each man's sight.

Might we by cunning come by two skins

of the fierce bears, and sew you therein,

there is no living man alive who should know you.

But keep yourselves off of the main roads to guard against mishaps, I advise.

Certainly no better counsel by reason do I know

than to such a bold beast best to be disguised,

for they by all manners are likest man.

The bearskins conceal even as they draw attention; the word "grisli" carries a strong association with sight and especially connotes supernatural beings that are terrifying to look on.[169] That the

[169] *Oxford English Dictionary* s.v. grisly (adj.). The sense of "grizzly bear" does not arise until the early 19th century.

bearskins Alisaundre finds are white heightens the Otherworldly spectacle. Yet, Alisaundre advises the lovers to keep out of sight, away from the main roads. Though the pair of bears will not be recognizable as William and Melior, nor will they escape notice. Paradoxically, though, bears are also recognizably human-like. This sense of proximity belies the radical concept of an animal disguise, which far outstrips the distance other romance characters traverse when they disguise themselves as pilgrims, minstrels, merchants, or other human subjects. Bears are only "likest man" in contrast to other animals, and indeed Alisaundre has begun by eliminating the usual, human disguises of the genre:

> eche a kuntre worþ kept wiþ kud men inouȝe,
> eche brug, eche paþþe, eche brode weye,
> þat noþer clerk nor kniȝt, nor of cuntre cherle,
> schal passe unparceyved and pertiliche ofsouȝt. (1673-1676.)

> each country will be kept with trusted men enough,
> each bridge, each path, each broad way,
> that neither clerk nor knight, nor country churl,
> shall pass without being noticed and quickly searched.

Imagining a landscape crawling with people, Alisaundre sweeps aside the usual deployment of the topos for something that neither the hypothetical search parties in the romance nor the audience expects to see.

In doing so, however, she draws on a tradition of thought about bears and their resemblance to humans. Michel Pastoureau notes:

> [medieval] writers remarked that once stripped of its fur, a bear's body was identical to a man's body. This made rituals of disguise all the easier. "Playing the bear"—*ursum facere*, as the prelates who denounced the practice throughout the Middle Ages called it—was an easy exercise, easier than "playing" the stag, the ass, or the bull, three other animals targeted by these prohibitions. To transform oneself into a bear, one merely had to put on a furry garment, draw in one's shoulders, and walk with legs far apart.[170]

The bear offers a practical animal disguise, but more importantly it offers an intermediary between the human and animal worlds. What's more, the lovers' disguises are not only bearskins, but white bearskins. This choice is particularly striking because their subsequent disguises as hart and hind are not in white skins, despite the prevalence of the white deer topos in medieval romance and related genres. White deer appear, for example, in Chretien de Troye's *Erec et Enide*, Marie de France's *Guigemar*, Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur* (in multiple episodes), the Welsh *Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed*, and Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristano*, among others. White deer signal an encounter with the Otherworld or sometimes the divine. In an episode of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, a group of Grail knights witness a white hart and four lions; the hart transforms into a hermit, while the lions become the symbols of the evangelists: a man, a lion, an eagle, and an ox. The white deer in *Guigemar* triggers the titular knight's journey which will take him on a mysterious rudderless ship to an imprisoned lady who will become his lover. In *Pwyll Pendefig*

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[170] Pastoureau, *The Bear,* 62.

Dyfed, Dyfed finds a pack of hounds feeding on a slain white stag and drives them away in favor of his own hounds. This leads to a confrontation with Arawn, a king of the Otherworld kingdom Annwvn, and to Dyfed and Arawn trading places for a year and a day. In all of these cases, the white deer marks an entry into an other-than-human world. In *William of Palerne*, the white quality is given to the bear, the animal "likest man," to signal a passing into an animal world. That these bears, "breme" or not, are distinctly prey rather than predator suggests that this naturalistic world will be one of pronounced vulnerability, not separated from the human world but overlaid with ever-present humans who have the ability to hunt animals even to extirpation. That sense of vulnerability echoes the "lack" that Nicolette Zeeman reads in the usage of *kynde* in *Piers Plowman*:

> In *Piers Plowman kynde* is associated with various forms of "being without": it alludes to states of denial, neediness, insecurity, risk, sin - and the suffering associated with them; it can also denote being unburdened by certain earthly and spiritual "goods"; but in all these cases, even that of sin, *kynde* is defined in terms of lack - patient endurance of which may bring the most extreme spiritual rewards.[171]

Though Alphonse ensures that William and Meliors do not want for food or drink, they lack security, safety, the comforts of the court, the society of other humans. As in *Piers Plowman*, this state of lack leads to ethical gains. For *William of Palerne*, however, that ethical *kyndenesse* is far more secular, drawing on an empathy learned from walking in the shoes (or in this case, the skin) of a vulnerable Other.

[171] Zeeman, "The Condition of *Kynde*," 3.

III. "I Am Swiche a Best as Ȝe Ben": Disguise and Transformation

Alongside the animal disguises of William and Melior the romance stages an animal transformation: that of the werewolf Alphonse. In her examination of werewolves, Caroline Walker Bynum observes that many of the werewolf tales beginning around 1200, including *Guillaume de Palerne, William*'s source text, are about "sympathetic" or "fake" werewolves that maintain their human rationality. This is in contrast to both more ancient and more modern werewolves: "Ferocious, hairy, dripping with blood, a devourer of human beings, the werewolf of Pliny, Ovid and Petronius is, like the werewolf of modern TV and folk story, an emblem of the periodic eruption of the bestial from within the human."[172] Indeed, in *William* the werewolf's *kynde* is modified by behavior that is "kind" but also strange and unnatural for an apparent wolf. William marvels at the creature bringing them food: "so wonder a wilde best, þat weldes no mynde" (so wondrous a wild beast, that wields no mind, 1874). Again, we are told:

> Þerof was William awondred, and Meliors alse,
> why þe best nold abide þat so wel hem helped;
> and seide eiþer til oþer, 'Now, sertes, for soþe,
> þis best has mannes kynde, it may be non oþer.
> Se what sorwe he suffres to save us tweine;
> and namli when we han nede, never he ne fayleþ
> þat he ne bringeþ, wher we ben, þat to us bihoves.' (2503-2509)

[172] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity,* 94.

> Thereof was William astonished, and Meliors also,
> why the beast would not abide that helped them so well;
> and said either to the other, "Now, certainly, for truth,
> this beast has man's *kynde*, it may not be else.
> See what sorrow he suffers to save us two;
> and namely when we have need, he never fails
> but that he brings, where we are, what behooves us."

Alphonse's *kynde* seems to be more determined by his behavior than his form, though the repeated astonishment of his beneficiaries does point to his strange, hybrid identity. Walker Bynum connects *Guilliaume* to Gerald of Wales's account of a priest encountering a similarly "sympathetic" werewolf, transformed by a saint, who is seeking communion for his dying mate. The priest confers last rites but is reluctant to administer Communion until the wolves reveal their true nature:

> To remove all doubt he pulled all the skin off the she-wolf from the head down to the navel, folding it back with his paw as if it were a hand. And immediately the shape of an old woman, clear to be seen, appeared. At that, the priest, more through terror than reason, communicated her as she had earnestly demanded, and she then devoutly received the sacrament. Afterwards the skin which had been removed by the he-wolf resumed its former position.[173]

[173] Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland* trans. John O'Meera (London: Penguin 1982), 100-101.

This transformation-as-garment, Bynum argues, "is not a case of metempsychosis at all," by "metempsychosis" meaning "body-hopping, body-exchange, or body-erasure."[174] But neither is it a case of disguise. Gerald's werewolves seem to fall somewhere between transformation and disguise, as on a spectrum. A "true" werewolf, whose form and nature are both changed, might stand as a case of straightforward transformation on the one hand, with William and Melior's animal skin disguises on the other end of the spectrum. In between are Gerald's werewolves and Alphonse, the latter a bit more towards a full transformation than the former.

Viewing disguise and transformation as points on a spectrum radically undercuts the strong association in romance between clothing and identity. In *Sir Isumbras,* as Elizabeth Fowler argues, the divestment and investiture of the titular character's social identity align with his changes of clothing, as when the knight becomes a smith and builds his own armor.[175] *William of Palerne* too insists on clothing as identity, beginning with the foundling topos. When the churl finds baby William, the child's royal identity is signified by his clothing:

> Þanne ofsaw he ful sone þat semliche child,
> þat so loveliche lay and wep in þat loþli cave,
> cloþed ful komly for ani kud kinges sone,
> in gode cloþes of gold agreþed ful riche,
> wiþ perrey and pellure pertelyche to þe riȝttes. (49-53)
>
> Then saw he very soon that seemly child,

[174] Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* 108, 79

[175] Fowler, "Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in *Sir Isumbras*."

that so lovely lay and wept in that lowly cave,
clothed very comely for any famous king's son,
in good clothes of gold dressed very richly,
with gems and fur plainly to rights.

William is indeed a king's son; his father is the King of Sicily. His clothing has accurately and intelligibly represented his *kynde*. The choice of fur rather than other expensive material such as damask or brocade also foreshadows William's animal skin disguises, suggesting that those disguises are more fundamental to William's identity than mere conveniences. This image recurs when Melior, in love with William, debates with herself about whether to suppress her feelings:

And þouȝh he as fundeling where founde in þe forest wilde,
and kept wiþ þe kowherde kin, to karp þe soþe,
eche creature may know he was kome of gode.
For first whan þe fre was in þe forest founde in his denne,
in comely cloþes was he clad for any kinges sone. (502-506)

And though he as a foundling was found in the wild forest,
and reared with the cowherd's kin, to tell the truth,
each creature may know he came from good [people].
For when the man was in the forest found in his den,
he was clad in clothes comely [enough] for any king's son.

The baby's rich clothing outweighs the fact of his upbringing by a cowherd to suggest a higher nature, amplifying William's status as a fair unknown. Later, when the lovers don their bear disguises, they must hide their identity by hiding their clothes, "and preiede here ful presteli to put hem þerinne / so semli þat no seg miȝt se here cloþes." (and prayed her very quickly to put them therein / so skillfully that no man might see their clothes, 1717-1718). We are told that Alisaundre sews the skins "above hire trie atir, to talke þe soþe," (above their true attire, to tell the truth. 1721). The idea that attire can be "true" or, by implication, "false," gets at the trick of disguise, whereby clothing true to a person's *kynde* can be exchanged for clothing that conceals it. Here, however, the "true" clothing, like the true forms of Gerald of Wales's werewolves, is underneath all along. Unlike in Gerald's episode, though, that form is expressed by clothing rather than the body. Later, when the pair are in deerskins, the Queen of Sicily spots their clothing underneath the skins, revealing their identity:

> Þe hote sunne hade so hard þe hides stived,
> þat here comli cloþing þat kevered hem þerunder
> þe quen saw, as sche sat, out bi þe sides sene,
> and wex awondred þerof, wittow for soþe. (3033-3036)

> The hot sun had so hard the hides stiffened,
> that their comely clothing that covered them thereunder
> the queen saw, as she sat, out by the sides seen,
> and wondered thereof, you know the truth.

The clothing that the lovers wear underneath their disguises marks both their species and their class; it also, given the circumstances of their flight, marks their individual identity. *William*'s deployment of disguise is unusual in that the lovers can retain their "true" clothing under the false, but clothing is a crucial signifier of identity across the genre. And yet, disguise is one of the most common topoi of the genre. If clothes can be taken off and on, are they really such a reliable *kynde* marker? And can wearing a disguise for too long or too well threaten your identity? Disguise as a topos destabilizes this key marker of *kynde*, and this effect is underlined in *William of Palerne* by the connection drawn between disguise and transformation.

Even though William and Melior's animal skins are disguises, not true transformations, they seem rather difficult to remove. When the pair are hiding in the quarry, they overhear from the workers that they are planning an attack on the two bears. William urges Melior to take off her disguise:

> And, dere hert, deliverli do as ich þe rede,
> dof blive þis bere-skyn, and be stille in þi cloþes;
> and as sone as þou art seie þou schalt sone be knowe;
> þan worþ þi liif leng[þe]d for love of þi fader.
> So miȝtow be saved, forsoþe, never elles;
> and þouhȝ þei murþer me þanne, I no make no strengþe. (2343-2347)

> And, dear heart, quickly do as I advise you,
> remove quickly this bear-skin, and be still in your clothes;
> and as soon as you are seen you shall soon be known;

then will your life be lengthened for love of your father.

So might you be saved, in truth, never else;

And though they murder me then, I do not care.

Removing the bearskin and returning to her true clothing would allow Melior to resume her former identity as the daughter of the Roman Emperor, but it would compromise her identity as a lover, separating her from William. Thus Melior vows, "Nay, bi him þat wiþ his blod bouȝt us on þe rode, / þe beres fel schal never fro my bac, siker be þerfore!" (No, by him that with his blood bought us on the cross, / the bear's skin shall never leave my back, be assured therefore! 2361). The sense of wearing clothes on one's back is a common idiom, and its use here also serves to emphasize Melior's body under the skin. "Bak" be a metonym for "an animal's pelt or skin," collapsing the distance between Melior's flesh and the bear's flesh and denying the layer of true clothing in between.[176] When Alphonse leads their attackers away and the lovers can escape together, it makes sense for them both to remove their bearskins because their disguise has been compromised. Yet, they are unwilling to leave the incriminating bearskins behind:

cloþed in here cloþes out of þe cave þei went,

wiþ hem boþe bere-felles þei bere in here armes,

so loþ hem was þo to lese or leve hem bihinde. (2429-2430)

clothed in their clothes out of the cave they went,

with them both bear-skins they bore in their arms,

[176] *MED* s.v. bak

so loath were they then to lose or leave them behind.

The text emphasizes the return to their "true" clothed state, but the bearskins have a strong hold that flies in the face of pragmatism. Even removed, the skins remain connected to the lovers, who still seem to retain something of the bear in their punning "bearing" of the skins, though now in their arms rather than on their backs. William and Melior don't leave their bearskins until they can replace them with deerskins, and this second disguise is not particularly motivated by the plot.

And namliche on þe morwe many men hem souȝt
in wodes and wildernesse wide-where aboute;
and as þei walked in wodes wiþ ful gode houndes,
þei founde þe beres skinnes and þe bestes flayne.
Þat it was an hert and an hinde hastili þei knewen,
and wist wel þat þei went wrapped in þe skinnes,
þei þat bifore had be as tvo white beres;
and wist þat þai in wast wrouȝt þertofore
for al þe hard huntyng þat þei hadde maked.
And folwe hem durst þei no ferre for a gret werre,
þat was wonderli hard, in þe next londe;
and þo þe seute sesed after þe swete bestes. (2604-2615)

And indeed on the morrow many men sought them

in woods and wilderness far and wide;

and as they walked in the woods with very good hounds,

they found the bearskins and the beasts flayed.

That it was a hart and a hind they quickly knew,

and knew well that they went wrapped in the skins,

they that before had been as two white bears;

and knew that they in vain did so previously

for all the hard hunting that they had done.

And follow them they dared no farther because of a great war,

that was amazingly fierce, in the next land;

and then the pursuit ceased after the sweet beasts.

For narrative events to be unmotivated by the plot is common for romances, particularly when thematic concerns are more pressing than the plot. The romance dismisses both the efficacy of and need for the new disguises immediately in a move that further emphasizes that hanging onto the bearskins, too, has been counterproductive from a purely plot-based point of view. Clearly, these disguises are oriented to thematic rather than narrative demands. The tenacity of the animal disguises—the lovers' reluctance to leave behind the bearskins and their readiness to don deerskins even without narrative motivations—undercuts the seeming lightness of the disguise topos. Perhaps, it suggests, disguises are not quite so easy to take off. Perhaps the experience of wearing a disguise—of moving through the space and the *kynde* of subjectivity that disguise grants access to—can have a way of staying with our disguised heroes.

In another sense, however, William and Melior are constantly taking off and putting on their disguises by altering their behavior. In both bearskins and deerskins, the lovers alternate between walking on two feet and walking on all fours, and the narrator assiduously updates us on their current gait. When they flee the Roman court as bears, "Whilum þei went on alle four, as doþ wilde bestes, / and whan þei wery were, þei went upriȝttes" (At times they went on all four, as do wild beasts, / and when they were weary, they went upright, 1788-1789). Again we are told,

> faire on þer tvo fet þei ferde upon niȝtes,
> but whan it drow to be dai, þei ferde as bestes,
> ferd on here foure fet in fourme of tvo beres. (1913-1915)

> fairly on their two feet they fared by night,
> but when it drew close to dawn, they fared as beasts,
> fared on their four feet in the form of two bears.

The number of feet they go on, as much as the skins they are wearing, is a signifier of the lovers' species, conveying the "form" of bears. The bear again makes a helpful intermediary here, because while going on all fours is more beast-like, going on two feet is still plausible for bears.

Miming deer behavior requires a little more commitment, which is complicated by the next leg of the lovers' journey: stowing aboard a ship carrying fine wines to Sicily. In a

somewhat strange episode new to the English version of the story, William and Melior are accosted by a "barelegged" boy while trying to leave the ship at their destination[177]:

> But whan þe boie of þe barge þe bestes ofseie,
> he was neiȝ wod of his witt, witow, for fere,
> and beþouȝt him þere þe bestes for to quelle.
> And happili to þe hinde he hit þanne formest,
> and set hire a sad strok so sore in þe necke,
> þat sche top over tail tombled over þe hacches.
> But þe hert fui hastili hent hire up in armes,
> and bare hire forþ over bord on a brod planke,
> and nas bold wiþ þe boye no debate make,
> but fayn was away to fie, for fere of mo gestes. (2771-2780)

> But when the boy of the barge saw the beasts,
> he was nearly mad out of his wits, you know, for fear,
> and thought there to kill the beasts.
> And it happened that the hind he hit then first,

[177] Though the use of alliterative verse marks a significant formal departure, narratively the Middle English *William of Palerne* follows its French source relatively closely. This episode is the most significant new addition to the English version. For more about the differences between the texts, see Max Kaluža, "Das mittelenglische gedicht William of Palerne und seine französische quelle," *Englische Studiën* IV (1881): 196-287; Norman Toby Simms, *William of Palerne: A New Edition* (Norwood, Pa: Norwood Editions, 1776) p. 269-324. For a feminist reading of these differences that also encompasses the later Irish prose version, see Helen Cooper, "Women and Werewolves: *William of Palerne* in Three Cultures," in *Cultural Translations in Medieval Romance* ed. Victoria Flood and Megan G. Leitch (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022).

and gave her a grievous blow so sore in the neck,
that she top over tail tumbled over the hatches.
But the hart very quickly picked her up in arms,
and was not bold with the boy to pick a fight,
but was eager to go away, for fear of more blows.

The lovers' behavior here is both rather deerlike and yet in other ways not deerlike at all. The boy's fear emphasizes the improbability of finding deer stowed away on a ship. Their eagerness to flee rather than fight, on the other hand, and the loyalty of the mated pair, are both more in keeping with conventional deer behavior. Strangest of all, though, is William's move of picking Melior up in his arms. It is rather hard to imagine a deer performing this action, yet the text insists on it, telling us again,

Þe boye þat þe barge ȝemed of þe bestes hade wonder,
þat on bar of þe barge so boldeli þat oþer,
wiþ so comely contenaunce clippend in armes,
and ferden ferst on foure fet, and seþþe up tweyne. (2806-2809)

The boy that looked after the barge had wonder at the beasts,
that one bore off the barge so boldly that other,
with so comely countenance embraced in arms,
and fared first on four feet, and after on two.

When the boy relates the adventure to his shipmates, we get the image of the hart holding the hind in its arms a third time:

> and how he hitte þe hinde also he told,
> and how þe hert hire hent and hiȝed over borde,
> and wiþ how coynte cuntenaunce he cuverede hire after. (2822-2824)

> and how he hit the hind also he told,
> and how the hart held her and went overboard,
> and with how tender countenance he covered her afterward.

There can be no doubt that the text has William holding Melior in his arms in a distinctly un-deer-like posture. This strange episode expresses the limits of the lovers' disguise as transformation, rendering visible (to the audience, if not to the nonplussed boy) the human body underneath the deerskin. This episode also reinscribes their vulnerability. William has been figured as a hunted animal from the beginning, but now we get a sense of Melior's bodily vulnerability, too. What's more, William, knight though he is, finds himself as helpless here as before the colliers and the stoneworkers, but now he must flee from a solitary boy. For all of the heroic moments the romance offers during its battle sequences, here we are confronted with the extreme physical vulnerability of its heroes.

Soon after this episode, another somewhat strange deer encounter occurs. The lovers by now are in the deer park of the Queen of Sicily, and she has received numerous clues to their identity, including a dream, her priest's explication of that dream, and a glimpse of the lovers'

clothing peeking through their stiffened deer hides. Still, she remains uncertain, and dons a deerskin of her own to make contact with the pair:

> sche wold wirche in þis wise: wel to be sewed
> in an huge hindes hide, as þe oþer were,
> and busk out to þe bestes, and under a busk ligge,
> til sche wist what þei were, ȝif þei wold speke. (3060-3063)

> She would work in this way: to be sewed well
> into a huge hind's hide, as the others were,
> and hasten out to the beasts, and under a bush lie,
> until she knew what they were, if they would speak.

Why does the queen need to be sewn into a deerskin to approach William and Melior? Human speech seems to serve here as another marker of species *kynde* alongside gait and garments, and thus offers a final confirmation of William and Melior's *kynde*. There is also a sense, though, that the queen has to make a material and bodily commitment to meet the pair where they are. The queen's disguise here has become separated from all plot motivation and instead serves its most basic thematic function: allowing her to move through a different space and interact with a different *kynde* of subjects. Recognition scenes are a staple of the romance genre, and while *William* builds to the queen's recognition of William as her son, first they must recognize one another as being of the same species. Of the queen-as-deer, William says to Melior:

"[I]t weneþ þat we ben riȝt swiche as itselve,

for we be so sotiliche besewed in þise hides.

But wist it wisli whiche bestes we were,

it wold fle our felaschip for fere ful sone."

"Nay, bi Crist," sede þe quen, "þat al mankinde schaped,

I nel fle ful fer for fere of ȝouȝ tweyne!

I wot wel what ȝe ar and whennes ȝe come." (3116-3122)

"[I]t thinks that we are exactly such as itself,

for we are so ingeniously sewn in these hides.

If it knew wisely what beasts we were,

it would flee our fellowship for fear immediately."

"No, by Christ," said the queen, "that shaped all mankind,

I will not flee far for fear of you two!

I know well what you are and whence you come."

Having transitioned from bearskin to deerskin disguises, the lovers have also moved deeper into a kind of virtuous animal vulnerability. No longer is there any danger of the lovers seeming "breme," fierce; now they occupy a world where humans are beasts and to be feared. Seeking to recall the lovers to the human world, the queen invokes their human shape and reminds them of the human and courtly world from which they come. Just like the deer that William appears to be, however, he reacts with fear, demanding that the queen-as-deer declare whether she is a "god gost, in Goddis name þat spekist, / oiþer any foule fend fourmed in þise wise, / and ȝif we schul

of þe hent harme oþer gode" (good spiritual being, that speaks in God's name, or any foul fiend formed in this way, and if we shall receive from you harm or good, 3129-3131). Again forms rather than garments are at stake, blurring the boundary between disguise and transformation and emphasizing the difficulty the lovers have in returning to their "true" clothing and the human, courtly world it would allow them to once again move through. Though William and Melior are merely disguised as animals and still retain their human forms underneath, their experience moving through the animal world has transformed them: once a proven knight and a gutsy princess-lover, they have become as skittish as deer who must be approached as wild animals, aware of the depredations of the court.

IV. "Woned in Wirderness": Forest and Court

The forest world that William and Melior enter in their bearskins is a well-established topos in romance. Wild, dangerous, filled with marvels and magical encounters, the forest is the proving-ground of the knight, who must leave the world of the court to seek *aventure* lest he lose his reputation like Chrétien's Yvain, who is so besotted with his new wife that he neglects to adventure. The forest topos receives perhaps its best-known treatment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which, rather than the knight leaving the court to seek *aventure*, the forest takes on the form of a character in the person of the green knight and barges into the court. When Gawain leaves the court to seek the green knight in turn, the poet draws on the forest topos to elliptically catalogue Gawain's adventures:

> Mony klyf he ouerclambe in contraye3 straunge,
> Fer floten fro his frende3 fremedly he ryde3.

At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wȝye passed

He fonde a foo hym byfore—bot ferly hit were—

And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym byhode.

So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndeȝ,

Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþ dole.

Sumwhyle wyth wormeȝ he werreȝ, and with wolues als,

Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarreȝ,

Boþe wyth bulleȝ and bereȝ, and boreȝ oþerquyle,

And etayneȝ, þat hym anelede of þe heȝe felle;

Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe, and Dryȝtyn had serued,

Douteles he had ben ded and dreped ful ofte.

Many a cliff he overclimbed in countries strange,

Far flown from his friends as a foreigner he rides.

At each shore or water where the warrior passed

He found a foe before him— else a wonder it was—

And that so foul and so fierce that to fight him behooved.

So many marvels by mountains there the man finds,

It were too toilsome for to tell of the tenth part.

Sometimes with dragons he wars, and with wolves also,

Sometimes with wild men, that dwelt in the woods,

Both with bulls and bears, and boars at other times,

And ogres, that him annoyed from the high rocks;

Were he not doughty and enduring, and the dear Lord served,

Doubtless he had been dead and done for full oft. [178]

In many ways, the forest is the opposite of the court, although they are both knightly spaces. The knight is friendless and alone in the forest; he is an outsider, moving "fremedly," which the MED gives as "as a stranger; in a foreign or unhospitable land."[179] The rules of the forest are different from those of the court. Here, to *not* find a foe is a marvel, and the foes catalogued are marvelous creatures. That he defeats them proves Gawain's worth as a knight, though his true challenges will come later in the romance. Note, too, that bears belong to this world, alongside both animals and monsters. The only humans that appear here—apart from the questing knight himself—are wild men, "wodwos," whose name captures their connection to the wood, "wod," and to madness, "wode."[180] Other humans may appear in the forest—a knight may meet another knight, a hermit, or a castle that itself interrupts the space of the forest, as Gawain will following this passage—but the forest properly belongs to the other-than-human.

The polarity of the forest and the court also emerges in the tendency of the court to suddenly appear, surrounded by yet separate from the forest. At times a castle simply comes into view abruptly, but in other cases the castle's appearance is magical or miraculous. Gawain prays for guidance and is rewarded by a miraculous appearance:

Nade he sayned hymself, segge, bot þrye,

[178] *Gawain and the Green Knight*, 713-725.

[179] *MED* s.v. fremedli

[180] *Gawain and the Green Knight,* 763-770.

Er he watȝ war in þe wod of a won in a mote,

Abof a launde, on a lawe, loken vnder boȝeȝ

Of mony borelych bole aboute bi þe diches:

A castel þe comlokest þat euer knyȝt aȝte,

Pyched on a prayere, a park al aboute,

With a pyked palays pyned ful þik,

Þat vmbeteȝe mony tre mo þen two myle.

He had not signed himself, that stalwart, but thrice,

Ere he was aware in the wood of a dwelling within a moat,

Above an open lawn, on a low hill, locked under boughs

By many burly branches about by the ditches:

A castle the comeliest that ever knight commanded,

Placed on an open meadow, a park all around,

With a spiked palisade penned in full thick,

That enclosed many trees more than two miles. [181]

Because this castle is the court of Sir Bertilak, who will be revealed to be the same person as the green knight, paradoxically this court is both opposed to and aligned with the forest. Layers of enclosure muddy the relationship between the forest and the court; the outermost layer is the forest itself, followed by a moat, then an open lawn that provides some separation from the forest—yet the branches still reach over to invade this space. Within the meadow is a park, a

kind of tamed forest that is itself enclosed by a palisade that mirrors the relationship between the forest enclosing the castle as a whole. These conflicting images of openness and tangled trees, enclosure and reaching branches dramatize the conflict between the forest and the court even as they hint that Bertilak's castle is not as it seems.

William of Palerne exploits the topos of the forest to new ends as it stages the passage of its heroes into the forest. Rather than fighting with bears, as in *Gawain*, our heroes must become them, and the fearsome encounters they meet are with humans, and not knights or hermits but peasants, as in the collier episode we have seen earlier. The forest in *William* is not a wild space standing in opposition to the court, but rather is filled with human activity and marked by the same processes that build castles and courts. Like Gawain, they catch sight of a castle, but William and Melior are not happy to see it. What's more, this city enjoys a great deal more separation from the forest:

> Hit bitidde þat time þei travailed al a niȝt
> out of forest and friþes and alle faire wodes;
> no covert miȝt þei kacche, þe cuntre was so playne.
> And as it dawed liȝt day, to mene þe soþe,
> þai hadde a semli siȝt of a cite nobul,
> enclosed comeliche aboute wiþ fyn castelwerk. (2215-2220)

> It happened at that time that they traveled all night
> out of forest and park and all fair woods;
> no cover might they catch, the country was so plain.

And as it dawned light day, to tell the truth,
They had a seemly sight of a city noble,
enclosed beautifully about with fine castle work.

This human habitation has stripped back the forest around it, leaving land "playne," which can simply mean a plain but can also specifically indicate land that has been razed or cleared.[182] As a result, William and Melior lose "covert," literally a covering but also a shelter, place of refuge, or an animal's den.[183] Their loss of "covert" also threatens the loss of their status as a couple; the related word "coverture" suggests sex through its literal meaning of a bedspread and in legal usage refers to the position of a woman in marriage.[184] This wood lacks the powerful reaching branches of Gawain's forest. Like Gawain, William and Melior pray for assistance, but in reverse, seeking shelter from the court. Suddenly, a seemingly wild space appears:

"Amen, sire!" seide Meliors, "Marie þat us grau[n]t,
for þat blessed barnes love þat in hire bodi rest!"
Þanne wiȝtly wiþinne a while, as þei waited aboute,
þei saie a litel hem biside a semliche quarrere
under an heiȝ hel, al holwe newe diked.
Deliverli þei hieȝed hem þider for drede out of doute,

[182] *MED* s.v. plaine

[183] *MED* s.v. covert

[184] *MED* s.v. coverture; *OED* s.v. coverture

and crepten into a cave whanne þei þeder come,
al wery for walked, and wold take here reste. (2229-2236)

"Amen, sir!" said Meliors, "Mary grant us that,
for that blessed baby's love that in her body rests!"
Then quickly within a while, as they waited about,
they saw a little edge beside a seemly quarry
under a high hill, all hollow newly dug.
At once they hurried there for fear doubtlessly,
and crept into a cave when they came there,
all weary for walking, and would take their rest.

Once again, however, all is not as it seems. This cave is not an extension of the woods towards the city, but a man-made quarry, a mark of the city's effect on the natural environment. Quarry may also pun on the Middle English *quirre*, which refers to the parts of the deer given as a reward to hounds after a hunt (and is the ancestor of our modern word "quarry," the object of a pursuit).[185] This pun reminds us of the hunt that is still on for the lovers and warns of their dangerous approach to capture. The cave does not provide refuge; workers will in short order find the lovers and trap them there.

The appearance of a quarry is highly unusual in romance, perhaps unique to *William of Palerne*. Like the presence of the colliers who work the woods to create fuel for commerce and production, the quarriers reveal that ostensibly natural spaces are filled by peasants, not

[185] *MED* s.v. quarre

marvelous creatures and questing knights, and that they have been marked by human industry. What's more, the quarry in particular gives the lie to the tendency of romance castles to appear on the landscape with no material context or explanation. Castles, courts, and cities are built spaces, and they are built in part by stone that must be quarried. Iron and steel were closely tied to the forests, where much of the iron was mined and where trees supplied the charcoal needed for forging; iron forges were often located near these essential resources.[186] The forging process demanded huge quantities of charcoal:

> The furnaces were packed with layers of charcoal and crushed ore. A modern experiment using a 22cm. (8 1/2 ins.) diameter bowl furnace showed that 16 lbs. of charcoal are needed to produce one pound of iron. In the much larger late medieval furnace at Byrkeknott, 12 lbs. of charcoal were needed per pound of iron. Thus the demand for charcoal was rapacious: at Tudeley, with an estimated output of 6,000 pounds of iron a year, a minimum of 72,000 pounds of charcoal would have been required, if it was burnt at the same rate as at Byrekeknott. Even though the wood at Tudeley came from the forge owner's estate, the cost of making charcoal amounted to half of the forge's expenses.[187]

Even pre-Industrial Revolution, production and commerce placed huge demands on natural resources, including the production driven by war like the two wars featured in *William of Palerne*. Stone built the castles and defensive structures, like those which allowed the city in

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[186] Birell, "Peasant Craftsmen in the Medieval Forest," 96-99.

[187] Jane Geddes, "Iron," in *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products* ed. John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (London: The Hambledon Press 2001), 170-171.

William to be "enclosed comeliche aboute wiþ fyn castelwerk," and iron and steel built the armor and weapons as well as other necessary objects like tools and fastenings. The colliers and the quarry, then, mark not only the effect of extractive industries on the land, but also of industries driven by war like the two large-scale wars detailed in the romance. The landscape itself, like the quasi-animal bodies of the disguised lovers who move through it, is rendered vulnerable rather than threatening in *William of Palerne*. The vulnerability of place that the heroes witness in an inversion of the forest topos puts forward humans as the real danger, but this proposition does not weaken the romance's drive for kind treatment of its human characters. Rather, it highlights the need for a kinder ethic, showing the high stakes of human activity and, in particular, war.

V. "In a Grene Place": Gardens and Parks

We have seen how the presence of colliers and of a quarry reveal the impact of industry on the wild space of the forest, but *William* also explores two kinds of spaces that blur the forest-court dichotomy: gardens and parks. By their proximity to the court, these spaces are even more vulnerable to human misuse than the forest, and so they particularly highlight the vulnerability of the landscape to the depredations of war. Just as the forest is the site for knights to encounter perilous marvels, the enclosed garden is the site for lovers to encounter sensual pleasure. The enclosed garden, or *hortus conclusus*, represents both the historical, material private pleasure-gardens of the nobility and the pervasive literary topos of an early paradise, particularly prized as a secret meeting-place for lovers.[188] When William falls in love with Melior, he goes straightaway to the enclosed garden, following the well-trod path laid by the topos:

[188] Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 76-118.

Þat unglad gom þan goth into a gardin evene,
þat was a perles place for ani prince of erþe,
and wynli with heie wal was closed al aboute.
Þat previ pleyng place, to prove þe sooþe,
joyned wel justly to Meliors chamber. (747-751)

That unhappy man then goes into a garden directly,
that was a peerless place for any prince of earth,
and pleasingly with high walls was closed all about.
That private playing place, to tell the truth,
joined closely to Melior's chamber.

Fittingly, the garden also ajoins to Melior's chamber, suggesting the erotic access this space promises. Enclosed gardens play with exclusion and access, interior and exterior, so that, according to Arlyn Diamon, this garden "lies under Melior's gaze, part of her domain as the heiress to the Emperor, yet at the same time accessible to the foundling William, by its very design enables them to meet."[189] The enclosed garden also offers a refuge: from prying courtly eyes on the one hand and rough wilderness on the other. This refuge is a fragile one, however. A garden can provide a temporary home for lovesick William or for illicit trysts, but it cannot stop a marriage and it certainly cannot shelter two bears. This garden is the same one that the lovers-as-bears comically flee through, startling a Greek man: "Nouȝ fro þe gardin þei gon a god spede / toward a fair forest fast þerbiside" (Now from the garden they go at a good speed / toward a fair

[189] Arlyn Diamon, "Meeting Grounds: Garden in Middle English Romance," in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance* eds. Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic, Judith Weiss (London: Boydell & Brewer 2012), 132.

forest close thereby, 1786-1787). Just as the garden serves as an access route into Melior's chamber, so it also provides a route out of the court into the woods. The forest provides a new refuge, literally enclosing the lovers in a hollow oak that is an addition of the English poet:

> Þei drow hem to a dern den for drede to be seiȝen
> and hedde hem under an holw hok, was an huge denne;
> as it fel a faire hap, þei fond þeron to rest.
> Fer it was fro weiȝes, and of wode so þikke,
> þat no wiȝt of þe world wold hem þere seche. (1792-1796)

> They drew to a secluded den for fear to be seen
> and hid under a hollow oak, was a huge den;
> as it befell, they found there to rest.
> Far it was from people, and of woods so thick,
> that no man of the world would seek them there.

The woods will provide a new refuge, farther from the reaches of the court, until the forest topos is punctured by the presence of the quarry and the colliers.

Later, we encounter another kind of liminal green space: the park. A traditional deer park included a surrounding wall, a water feature, a small enclosed herb and vegetable garden, orchards, a pavilion or lodge called a gloriet, an orchard, and beyond that the parkland itself, which was planted with a mixture of trees and grasses placed to appear natural.[190] When William

[190] John Fletcher, *Gardens of Earthly Delight: The History of Deer Parks* (Oxford: Oxbow Books 2011), 226-229.

and Melior arrive in Palermo wearing deerskins, they find shelter, appropriately enough, in a deer park.

> A pris place was under þe paleys, a park as it were,
> þat whilom wiþ wilde bestes was wel restored;
> but þe segges þat held þe sege had it al destruyt.
> Þe hert and þe hinde þere þanne hem hed sone,
> as þe werwolf hem wissed, þat ay was here gye,
> under a coynte crag, fast bi þe quenes chaumber. (2845-2850)

> A private place was under the palace, a park as it were,
> that once with wild beasts was well restored;
> but the men that held the siege had it all destroyed.
> The hart and the hind there hid soon,
> as the werewolf advised, that was always their guide,
> under a marvelous cliff, right by the queen's chamber.

The deer park represents a mirror of the enclosed garden beneath Melior's window and suggests a route back to the human world they had left through that garden. However, despite their similarities, deer parks and enclosed gardens are not the same. A deer park is just wild enough that, unlike in an enclosed garden, the disguised lovers can linger there in their animal costumes. Ultimately, however, a deer park is a courtly space artificially managed to appear wild; in effect, it is the court disguised as the forest.

This deer park is a mess of contradictions. This is a managed space restored to a wild-like condition with the introduction of ostensibly wild animals. Whether deer kept in an enclosure are truly wild, though, is perhaps open to question; and at any rate the deer kept in English deer parks would have been fallow deer, a species imported by the Normans and distinct from the native red and roe deer species.[191] The "hart" and "hind" terms for the lovers' disguises refer typically to red deer, and indeed William and Melior have gotten their skins from wild deer. The two wild species in England were red and roe deer, and roe, less than a quarter the size of red deer, would be too small for the purpose.[192] The red deer was a storied animal; large, noble, challenging to hunt, the red deer and especially the hart looms large in literature and art, carrying a touch of magic or marvel, symbolizing a wide array of divine mysteries, and, along with the hind, often used as a commonplace for lovers.[193] As they are nobles and lovers, William and Melior's representation by a hart and a hind are conventional. By contrast, the fallow deer, the deer of parks, are half the size of red deer, and are at once tamer in their disposition and more exotic in their looks, retaining speckled coats into adulthood and, in the male, bearing impressive palmate antlers.[194] “Fallow deer," John Fletcher writes, "had never been known in the wild except as escapees or deliberate releases from captivity. As such they were a step closer to domestic animals than red deer.”[195]

So, though the park "wiþ wilde bestes was wel restored," in fact what we have is a space that has been planted to look natural with animals that seem wild but are more accurately

[191] Fletcher, *Gardens of Earthly Delight,* 220-223.

[192] Fletcher, *Gardens of Earthly Delight,* 253.

[193] Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk*, 32-33, 83

[194] Fletcher, *Gardens of Earthly Delight,* 230.

[195] Fletcher, *Gardens of Earthly Delight,* 256

somewhere in between. This tension between seeming and being and between the forest and the court speaks to the ambivalent status of the lovers-as-deer. Meanwhile, the park has also been "destroyed" by the siege; it is a place at once returned to a desirable former state and yet also ruined. The park, like so many places and people in the romances, is caught in an in-between state, poised between restoration and destruction. The threat to the park, as with the activities of the charcoal-burners and the quarriers, comes down to war. The King of Spain, Alphonse's father, has sought the daughter of the Queen of Palermo for his son (Alphonse's half-brother). Enraged at being refused, Spain launches a war against Palermo:

> Forþi þe king and his sone swiche werre arered;
> for þei hadde luþerli here lond brend and destrued,
> brent bold borwes, and burnes bruttened to deþe;
> and ofsette hire so harde, þe soþe for to telle,
> þat prestli to hire puple to Palerne sche ferde;
> and þe king biseget þe cite selcouþli harde,
> and mani a sad sauȝt his sone þerto made. (2645-2651)

> At once the king and his son likewise were stirred up;
> for they had wickedly burned and destroyed her land,
> burned sturdy towns, and killed people to death;
> and beset her so hard, to tell the truth,
> that presently to her people at Palermo she went;
> and the king besieged the city exceedingly hard,

and many a lamentable assault his son made there.

This wide-ranging destruction encompasses everything. Here the land, the people, and the polity are all interconnected, all faced with annihilation. Even built and natural environments are connected here, so that the "lond" (land) and "borwes" (towns) both burn in a parallel construction. The queen has fled to the city of Palermo, the heart of her kingdom, and even offers to leave into exile with her daughter, giving up her sovereignty to the King of Spain, an offer he refuses because he will accept her daughter and nothing else.

sche wold wiþ god wille, wiþoute more lette,
meke hire in his merci on þise maner wise,
to give him boute grucching al þat gode,
so þat sche miȝt saufli wiþ hire semli douȝer
wende wiȝtli awei whider hire god liked.
Þe messegeres manli in here weye went;
spacli to þe king of Spayne þis speche þei tolde.
But he swor his oþ þat he asent nold
for no man upon molde, but he most have hire douȝter. (2685-2693)

She would with goodwill, without more delay,
humble herself in his mercy in this manner,
to give him without complaint all her goods,
so that she might safely with her seemly daughter

go at once away wherever she liked well.

The manly messengers went on their way;

straight to the king of Spain this speech they told.

But he swore his oath that he would not assent

for any man on Earth, but he must have her daughter.

The queen asks that Spain give her a truce of two weeks; this offer is contingent on her father, the Emperor of Greece, not arriving with aid in that timeframe. Nonetheless, it is a near total capitulation: "al þat gode" refers to the queen's collective possessions, property, and wealth.[196] The King of Spain rejects her offer not on the grounds that he fears her father will arrive, but because she has not offered him enough.

The war between Spain and Palermo is totalizing not only in its destruction, but also in its aims. The queen attempts to sever her daughter's body from the polity, to save one at the expense of the other, but this proves impossible, and both remain vulnerable to the aggression of Spain. All of this drama occurs against the backdrop of the deer park, which seems to act not only as an in-between space for geography, but for temporality as well. William and Melior linger in limbo, neither continuing to flee nor setting down new roots, seeming to wait for something. Requesting a truce, the queen seeks to draw out the moment before her kingdom's total destruction or capitulation. The deer park dramatizes the vulnerability brought by war, acting as a liminal space between forest and court, restoration and destruction, and, for William and Melior, a staging-ground for their transition between animal and human, prey and triumphant warrior.

[196] *MED* s.v. god 11(a)

VI. "Wich Sorwe We Have Us Selve Wrouȝt": Conclusion

War in medieval romance is a glorious thing, the ultimate proving-ground of the knight and source of vindication for the righteous. In *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, for example, the heroic Emere is defined in part by his martial prowess, "Yondur ys a nobull knyght, / That styrryth him styfly in þe fyght" (Yonder is a noble night / that moves boldly in the fight, 484-485), and it is the villainous Mylys who suggests they avoid a battle that seems unwinnable:

> And ye wolde at my councell doo,
> Ye schoulde not fyght in fylde,
> But close þe ȝatys and þe bryggys vp drawe,
> And kepe vs clene owt of þer awe,
> And owre wepons wyghtly welde. (530-534)

> If you would follow my advice,
> You should not fight in the field,
> But close the gates and draw up the bridge,
> And keep us entirely out of their danger,
> And our weapons valiantly wield.

That wielding weapons is at odds with Myly's plans of disengaging shows the necessity of portraying waiting out a siege as a kind of fighting, too, but nonetheless the hero Emere reproaches him for suggesting such a tactic:

So myght a sympull grome do,

Kepe an holde wythynne;

But we wyll manly to þe felde... (539-341)

So might a stupid man do,

Stay and remain within;

But we will go valiantly to the field...

Accordingly, in *William of Palerne*, our hero behaves as a hero should when war breaks out in Rome: "Whanne William, þat worþi child, wist of þat fare, / was no glader gom þat ever God made" (When William, that worthy child, knew of that happening, / there was no gladder man that ever God made, 1091-1092). This war, putting down a rebellion by the Duke of Saxony, provides an opportunity for William to be knighted and to prove himself on the battlefield, though William's enthusiasm for the conflict may be slightly called into question by the dire description of the duke's destructiveness just a few lines before:

and wiþ bobaunce and wiþ bost brent fele tounes;

no strengþe him wiþstod of sad stonen walls,

but bet adoun burwes and brutned moche peple,

so þat duel was to deme þe duresse þat he wrouȝt. (1071-1074)

and with insolence and with boast burned good towns;

no strength of solid stone walls withstood him,

but conquered towns and killed many people,

so that it was sad to consider the affliction that he wrought.

Here again we see the destruction of both people and the material environment linked. There is some irony in the fact that William celebrates what the narrator tells us is a sad situation but, as we have seen with Emere in *Le Bone Florence*, it is highly conventional for male, knightly romance heroes to enthusiastically embrace war.

The romance again follows genre convention by having William distinguish himself in glorious, bloody combat:

Þere þe pres was perelouste, he priked in formest,

and blessed so wiþ his briȝt bront aboute in eche side,

þat what rink so he rauȝt, he ros never after.

And soþli forto seie, wiþinne a schort while

William wiþ his owne hond so wiȝtliche pleide,

þat he slow six of þe grettes, soþ forto telle,

and þat dottiest were of dede of þe dukes ost. (1190-1197)

Where the press was most perilous, he spurred in first,

and hurt so with his bright sword about on each side,

that whatever man he struck, he rose never after.

And truly to say, within a short while

William with his own hand so manly fought,

that he slew six of the greatest, to tell the truth,
and doughtiest of deed of the duke's host.

Less conventionally, though, the romance then has William succumb to superior strength and be captured. More commonly the hero rescues someone else, as the sultan does in *King of Tars*; *Le Bone Florence of Rome* has Emere being captured, but only directly after and as a result of his rescue of Mylys, who abandons Emere in his need. *William*, on the other hand, makes no apologies for its hero's capture:

But, soþliche for to telle, so was he overmacched,
þat þei wiþ fyn force forbarred his strokes,
and woundede him wikkedly, and wonne him of his stede,
and bounden him as blive, him bale to wirche. (1216-1219)

But, to tell the truth, so was he outmatched,
that they with fine force blocked his strokes,
and wounded him terribly, and took his steed from him,
and bound him quickly, his ruin to work.

Not only has William been outmatched rather than ambushed or betrayed, but he is humiliatingly unhorsed and bound, a fate usually bestowed by romance protagonists on more minor characters. William is rescued, not by another heroic character, but by unnamed men:

But William whiȝes þat wiȝtly ofseiȝyen,

and demened hem douȝtili dintes te dele;

þe ȝong kene kniȝtes so kudden here strengþe,

þat þei wonne hem wiȝtly weyes ful large,

til þei hadde perced þe pres pertily to here maister,

and rescuede him rediliche for rinkes þat him ladden. (1223-1225)

But William's men saw that promptly,

and began to deal doughty blows;

the young keen knights so learned their strength,

that they exerted themselves valiantly and very boldly,

until they had pierced the press clearly to their master,

and rescued him readily from the men that held him.

In war, this episode seems to suggest, even the great and good are vulnerable to defeat and serious harm. Rather than providing an opportunity for a named hero to prove himself by rescuing someone, this capture underscores our hero's vulnerability.

As it does with its other villains, *William of Palerne* spares the rebellious Duke of Saxony from public humiliation, torture, and execution. However, the romance does have him die, effectively of a broken heart:

Þe douȝty duk of Saxoyne, þe duel þat he made,

for his peple was slayn and to prison take,

and wist þan he hade wrongly wrouȝt þurȝth his pride;
and swiche duel drow to hert for his dedus ille,
þat he deide on þe fifte day, to talke þe soþe.
Whanne þemperour þat wist, wiȝtly he comanded
to burye him as out to be swiche a burne nobul,
wiþ alle worchipe and wele; so was he sone. (1318-1325)

The doughty Duke of Saxony, he lamented,
for his people were slain and taken to prison,
and knew then that he had done wrongly through his pride;
and such sorrow drew to his heart for his ill deeds,
that he died on the fifth day, to tell the truth.
When the emperor knew that, quickly he commanded
to bury him as such a noble man ought to be,
with all honor and wealth; so was he soon.

The duke will not be executed, but nor will he wage war without consequences. Interestingly, it is not his bruised pride that the duke grieves, but his dead and captured men. Rebellion against a sovereign is always portrayed in romance as wrongful, but more pressing here is the death and destruction caused by war. The duke's death is an extension of the death he has brought to his people, underscoring the vulnerability of and connection between the body and the polity. Again, unlike in other romances, *William* exercises mercy, burying the duke with (rather unearned)

honor. Though war is an intrinsic part of the making of romances and their heroes, in *William* the tragic consequences of war are never out of sight.

The war against the Duke of Saxony is doubled by the later war between Spain and Sicily, in which William must prove himself not only as a knight, but as a king. Again William comports himself valiantly and proves his abilities as both a warrior and a leader, and again we see the war's instigators neither punished nor fully let off the hook. After William has captured both the King of Spain and his son, Alphonse's half-brother, the pair show remorse reminiscent of the Duke of Saxony's heartbreak:

> And soþli, as sone as he com, þe king seide him tille,
> "Lo, sone, wich sorwe we have us selve wrouȝt;
> þurh oure hautene hertes a gret harm we gete,
> to willne swiche willenyng þat wol nouȝt asente.
> It is a botles bale, bi God þat me fourmed,
> t[o] willne after a wif þat is awaywarde evere!"
> Þan seide his sone, "Forsoþe, sire, ȝe knowe
> þat we have wrongli wrouȝt; nowe is it wel sene.
> We mot holdes to oure harmes; it helpes nouȝt elles
> but give us geynli in þe grace of þis gode lady,
> and late hire worche with us as hire god likes." (3980-3990)
>
> And truly, as soon as he came, the king said to him,
> "Lo, son, what sorrow we have ourselves wrought;

through our haughty hearts a great harm we begat,
to desire such a prize that will not assent.
It is an unavailing torment, by God that formed me,
to desire after a wife that is ever wayward!"
Then said his son, "Truly, sire, you know
that we have done wrongly; now it is well seen.
We must resign ourselves to our harms; there's nothing else for it
but to give ourselves readily into the grace of this good lady,
and let her do with us as she likes well."

As with the Duke of Saxony, their motivation is put down to haughtiness or pride, linking the war to the personal failings of the rulers as well as emphasizing the senselessness of the destruction. This passage adds an admonition against the pursuit of an unwilling wife; "botles bale" can be read either as "unavailing torment" or more along the lines of "irreparable crime," emphasizing again both the futility and wrongness of the Spanish royals' actions and linking firmly the threats against the person of the Sicilian princess with the threats to the physical lands of Sicily and the state itself.

The King of Spain not only confesses his guilt, but offers to make amends:
let me make amendis for al my misgelt,
þat I so wrongli have werred and wasted ȝour londes.
As moche as any man mow ordeyne bi riȝt
I am redi to restore, and redeli, moreover,

al þe worchep þat I weld I wol of ȝou hold,

al þe londes and ledes þat long to my reaume. (3996-4001)

let me make amends for all of my wrongdoing,

that I so wrongly have warred and wasted your lands.

As much as any man may ordain by right

I am ready to restore, and readily, moreover,

all the sovereignty that I wield I will hold from you,

all the lands and men that belong to my realm.

The restoration that the king offers echoes the "wel restored" of Sicily's deer park and, together with the reference to wasted lands, centers the fate of the physical environment. The king's offers of reparations and even of sovereignty over his kingdom highlight the magnitude of his wrongdoing and the high stakes of war which, win or lose, threaten the polity of one of the warring kingdoms.

War remains a constituent piece of the romance genre, especially for those texts with male protagonists who must prove themselves as knights on the battlefield. However, *William of Palerne* shows an unusual consciousness of the high costs of war. Yet, even against this sensitivity, it offers greater kindness to its war making antagonists even than romances for which war is a less fraught activity. Where does this kindness come from? Perhaps in moving through the world as hunted rather than hunter, wearing soft skins rather than armor, experiencing the forest landscape as threatened haven rather than threatening badlands, William, Melior, and Alphonse have gained a new kind of gentleness based less on gentility than on an affective and

bodily connection to the land. Even the drive to build empires seems muted here; not only does the Queen of Sicily ultimately refuse the King of Spain's offer of sovereignty over his kingdom, but William and Melior have two sons, one who inherits Rome and the other Sicily, breaking up the empire united by their parents' marriage. William and Melior may have never literally transformed into the animals they disguised themselves as, and Alphonse may have been transformed back into a human once and for all, but the disguises in this text have allowed its characters to inhabit different subjectivities and move through different spaces. These experiences, in the end, have been transformative of their *kyndes* in every sense.

What results is a romance painfully cognizant of the material costs of war to human bodies, the landscape, and ultimately whole polities. A young William rejoices at the prospect of war as an opportunity to prove himself, but by the end of the narrative, amidst exploited forests, ruined deer parks, destroyed towns, and forfeit kingdoms, we arrive in a place where the King of Spain can wholeheartedly renounce his imperial ambitions. Even after all of the wrongs of the romance and its deeply-felt vulnerabilities, *William* finds a way to break the cycle of violence by prescribing not violent punishment, but kindness. This radical conclusion, I argue, is enabled by William and Melior's animal disguises. The disguise topos facilitates a temporary transgression of *kynde*, typically class *kynde*, often for the purpose of bringing lovers together. Here, William and Melior transgress species *kynde* and experience for themselves the vulnerability of hunted animals moving through a marred landscape. The lightness with which disguises can be assumed and removed imperils the fixity of class (and here, species) *kynde* as well as our ability to reliably "read" the *kynde* of others by their outward appearances. Disguise, then, requires us to imagine the interiority of romance characters, an interiority not made readily available in the usual course of romance's modes of characterization. It also suggests an encounter between our

characters and the subjectivity of the *kynde* they temporarily inhabit. That interiority can be literal and material, like the human bodies of William and Melior underneath the deerskins, or affective, as when Melior refuses to remove her bearskin even after discovery in the quarry, eschewing her identity as a princess for her identity as a lover. The opportunity that these disguises afford to "try on" another way of being ultimately instills empathy in the characters and the audience alike, allowing the romance to "try on" the guises of kindness and peace.

Coda

This project has explored the medieval concept of *kynde*, charting its movements as conversions of race and religion; exchanges of gender, class, and sexuality; and disguises and transformations of species. I have also shown *kynde*'s ethical force and, I hope, shed some light on romance as a *kynde*, considering its borders with other genres and meditating on its habits and its essential qualities, especially topoi. By recognizing these conventions and the associations and connections they carry, scholarship can draw connections across disparate texts, recognize variations on topoi that play with and subvert genre expectations, and, I believe, read romances not like modern novels or simple evidence of ideological positions but on their own terms as complex explorations. If I have at times uncovered contradictions or raised more questions than I have answered, then I have succeeded in showing the genre as I see it.

In the course of this project I have dedicated considerable pages to a select few romances and quoted freely and in passing from others. I could have chosen others. I wrote about the romances I did because they play with a topos in an unusual or interesting way, because they have something pressing to say about *kynde*, and because I enjoy reading and thinking about them. The same, however, could be said of other romances, and I hope that the readings and arguments I have offered here can provide suggestions for ways to understand other romances and topoi as they move beyond the genre. In this way I offer each chapter as an iteration on a theme, much like the topoi they explore.

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